A COLD IN MY WOMAN PARTS

BY

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Abstract

In A COLD IN MY WOMAN PARTS the author explores her background and bicultural marriage in order to better understand why she drifted away from her familiar, rural Midwest "hearth." A large section of the thesis is set during a first trip to Romania when the author, at the age of twenty three, is introduced to her fiancé's family and culture on his native turf. With the inclusion of photographs, the final section of the piece combines that early trip with a much later trip, twelve years into the marriage. Through short, carefully chosen scenes or snapshots of different times in the author's life and marriage, she seeks to piece together the various components of her identity.

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A Cold in My Woman Parts

I noticed the tiger's shabbiness and felt sorry for it, neglected in the dark of Mom's hope chest that sat at the foot of her bed. It held things like faded papers and folded blankets and a smell I didn't know. The blond chest sat snug up against the bed and Mom had to scoot it out a bit so the lid would fall back instead of slamming forward shut against little fingers. She told me so, and my little fingers curled in at the thought.

The tiger's fur was matted, skewing the stripes. It was stiff, not plush. It either had a bell at the tip of its tail or I've superimposed one, borrowing a memory of a memory and tacking them together. Mom snatched that ratty tiger out of my hands quick because it wasn't mine, it was Kathleen's, and I couldn't have it. Her tone surprised me, her face pinched sharp around flat eyes. Mom placed the tiger back in the chest, letting her hand caress a thin blanket beneath before gingerly shutting the lid.

I didn't think, then, about how the tiger got matted. But now I think of Kathleen drooling on it in her sleep or maybe my mother cried into it later. Maybe it became unfathomable to wash away drool or spent tears.

I eventually heard the lore of Kathleen and her blanket. Until not long before she died, Kathleen held tight to that blanket. When Mom insisted on washing it, Kathleen would wait by the washer then follow Mom out to the clothesline. She would grasp a corner while Mom clipped it up, standing guard until it dried just enough. One fist closed around the blanket and the other thumb in her mouth.

Mom felt the mass in Kathleen's belly one day when she changed her diaper. Later she and my dad would wonder why they hadn't felt it earlier. But who palpates a seemingly healthy child's belly to check for lumps that hide and sprout?

When I was a year old, the doctor finally told Mom to stop bringing me in so often. *She's fine*, he said. I was normal; there were no masses, no cancer. But something *had* to be wrong.

I was married before I stopped telling new doctors I was allergic to Penicillin. They'd put me on derivatives without problems. I asked Mom why she let me believe I was allergic all those years. *Well, you were,* she said. *You were.*

In 1965, the congenital tumor found too late was incurable. It had filled up Kathleen's little belly, migrating from kidney to liver to everywhere. At some point, the doctors had to drain extra fluid off her belly so she could eat. Dad said she held his hand afterwards and looked up at him as they walked outside. She told him it had hurt and asked why he'd let those people do that to her.

Mom left the room without looking at me and I sat there waiting to be comforted. Since she must have forgotten who I was, I wanted to say, *But it's me*. I didn't know there'd been another little girl. I didn't realize that Karen and Bobby and Kelly had been little too. They were all grown up even when I was born. I used to ask Karen about her mommy and daddy, what their names were. *Same as yours*, she would say, but I didn't believe her. *Same as Bobby's and Kelly's, too.* Once, I nodded and Karen thought I finally understood. Moments later, I ran

up to my parents. *Did you know that Karen and Bobby and Kelly have parents named Bill and Barb, too?*

One Christmas, Mom presented Dad with a photo album. It was green with a thin, gold border. A clingy film of plastic held the pictures against a sticky backing that grew yellow and hard over the years, allowing the still memories to slide free from the pages. Mom had spent weeks picking out and arranging what she hoped would be Dad's favorites. There were only a few pictures of Kathleen. I thought she looked different from the rest of us and Mom claimed Kathleen looked more like her side. In one, a very chubby baby Kathleen held on to a porch railing outside to support her short little legs. She sucked on her bottom lip and looked purposeful. I wondered what happened in the seconds later but I had no way to see her black and white world bloom into color. I had no memories to dip into.

Mom spent hours trying to get enough fluid down Kathleen for a test. She begged and cajoled herself ragged. Finally a nurse came in and said something about Kathleen being a stubborn brat. Mom shouted that red-haired nurse out of the room and down the hall. I've wished I could've shouted at her too, on Mom's behalf. But I wasn't around. That was Before Jenny. Before Jenny and After Jenny often divide our family stories.

Dad smiled when he told me he wasn't sure how they would have handled Kathleen as a teenager. She'd been so stubborn. She and our cousin Cindy were the same age and they fought over Kathleen's tricycle. Kathleen abandoned it for some other toy and Cindy climbed on. Before she could pedal off triumphant, Kathleen rushed into her way, grabbed the handle bars,

and straddled the front wheel. Dad said she stayed that way while Cindy slapped Kathleen's head and scratched at her gripping fingers. Tears rolled down Kathleen's stone set face but she endured the beating until Cindy gave up and went off wailing.

I wasn't supposed to be. Mom was thirty-nine and Dad was forty-one. The kids were nearly grown and Mom's childrearing days were dwindling. She could go back to work. They could take trips.

Then a failure of birth control led to the accident of me. Mom said, *Oh, your Dad was sure proud of himself. Walking around like a rooster. Once you were here, none of that mattered, though*. Most days I believed her. I even felt proud of being an accident, like the components of me had scoffed at the birth control in their path and pushed their way past it.

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, after Kathleen's existence became real to me but not fully incorporated, I wondered if I was born to fill a space. I wondered if Before Jenny replaced After Kathleen.

Mom never wanted to leave Kathleen's side. Dad had to insist that she let my aunts stay in the hospital once in a while so she could come see the other kids. But she wanted to turn around and go right back. Kathleen needed her more. Dad said, *Kelly, Karen and Bobby need you just as much.*

Flipping through the green photo album, catching pictures as they slid out, I searched for one in particular. Always that one – square with rounded off corners and the colors just a little too yellow-toned. Mom, Kelly and Bobby bundled up against the cold and perched atop a slide at the park. It was just days after Kathleen died. Kelly and Bobby looked toward the ground,

ready to launch, but Mom stared straight through the camera at Dad, condemning his documentation of the moment. What was she supposed to do? Smile?

People saw my father when they came in to the post office. In a one post-office town, everybody knew him. They all asked him about Kathleen. My sister Karen told me that up until the day Kathleen died, he answered, *Fine, she's just fine*. Karen said his hair went white in a few weeks' time.

We lived three blocks from the post office and I would meet my father on his way home. Mom watched from the porch. As far as I knew, Dad had always had white hair and I was his only little girl.

I was angry with Mom for leaving me in her room uncomforted. I knew it wasn't quite right. Once, years later, I told her about it and she screwed up her brow trying to remember snatching Kathleen's tiger from me and then leaving me alone in her room. She said, *No…I wouldn't. Did I?*

Karen said that the last time Kathleen came home from the hospital she wouldn't look at her blanket. She didn't seem to know it. She'd lost interest in everything and lay on the couch in the living room, just off the family room, just away from everyone.

I imagine this scene more than any of the other memories of Kathleen that I don't have because my daughter had a blanket she wouldn't let go of. What would it have taken for her to abandon it?

Karen was twelve, Bobby was eight and Kelly was seven. Dad woke them up in the middle of the night and took them to Grandma's little house in our back yard. Sprawled on Grandma's bed, they heard Mom scream as they took Kathleen's body away. Kelly was bothered by the screaming and wanted to go home. Karen and Bobby tried to hush her up. *I remember the body bag*, Karen told me. She didn't elaborate so I imagined a black bag for a small body, a body not yet four years old.

One December when I was in middle school, I told Karen that Mom was in a funk. Karen said, *Well, it's December*. *She's always in a funk in December.* I couldn't understand how my favorite time of the year could be sad. We always decorated to the hilt. We cooked and baked and bought and wrapped.

Karen said, *Mom's this way every year around Kathleen's birthday, haven't you noticed?* But we didn't talk about Kathleen's birthday and I hadn't noticed.

A few days after Kathleen died, seven year-old Kelly fell and scraped her knees. She ran crying to Mom who gave her the once over and said, *You're fine – there's nothing wrong with you.* Dad scooped Kelly up, sprayed her knees with Bactine and kissed the hurt. Then he delivered that hurt to my mom. *You can't do that, Barb,* he said. *She's your little girl, too.* Mom imparted this story when I was exhausted after a bout with the flu. Patience gone, I snapped at my three year-old daughter. Mom reacted to the tone of my voice. She scooped up my little girl and kissed my tone away.

My daughter didn't let go of her blanket for years. She'd tell me, *Blankie doesn't like going in the washer and dryer. It's lonely and dark in there, Mom.* But she liked that it was warm coming out of the dryer and she hugged it like a lost sister.

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1) My bedroom had a window fan. Not a propped-in box fan, but a fitted fan, bolted in place and somewhat resembling a jet engine. My parents had an identical model in their room. With the door closed, air was pulled across my bed through my other open window, making most nights bearable. Maybe two to three days a year, my father would grumble and pull our mattresses[1] downstairs so we could sleep in the path of our one a/c unit that hung gray and ugly out of the dining room window. I looked forward to these nights, but Dad hated them.

[1]Dad – When we were kids, when it got too hot we dragged a sheet out on the lawn and slept outside.
Jenny – What about mosquitos?
Dad- We were too hot to worry about the mosquitos.

2) "People on West 110th Street, where I lived, were a little too bourgeois to sit out on their fire escapes, but around the corner on 111th and farther uptown mattresses were put out as night fell, and whole families lay on those iron balconies in their underwear."

-Arthur Miller, "Before Air Conditioning", *The New Yorker,* June 22, 1998

3) Dad was militant about decency. My much older sisters weren't even allowed to come downstairs in curlers and bathrobes, but that was long before I was born. *My* Dad didn't comment on my long t-shirts over underwear that I wore all summer, sometimes until early afternoon.[2] But he also never entered my bedroom on those hot, but not hottest, of weeks, when he couldn't yet be convinced to sleep downstairs. Some nights I couldn't stand the weight of the t-shirt. Sometimes that jet engine blew no relief across my bed.

[2]My sisters took one look at me in my all-day-summer pjs and swore we had different fathers.

4) My parents often joined our neighbors Sonny and Pat on their porch after supper while I played with the neighborhood kids. Instead of kids, Pat had a job at the bank and lots to tell my mom. Sonny always had a beer in his hand and less to say. One kid pushed me (even me!) past my limit for gullibility and I yelled Bullshit straight in her face. Dad stood up in my peripheral

vision and sharply called my name. He didn't allow cursing. I shuffled my feet to the porch and sat on Dad's lap, sniffing tears, while Sonny bit against a smile. Sonny never censored himself and often swore in front of me, much to Dad's discomfort, but we sat on their porch anyway. [3]

[3]D – Air conditioning has ruined the American neighborhood. Nobody talks to each other. Nobody sits out on their front porches anymore.
J – Would you go back to living without it?
D – Hmmmph. We didn't know what we were missing at the time. But I know what we're missing now.

5. I would play with the neighborhood kids every day until we couldn't stand the heat. We would either cajole a parent into turning on the sprinkler or retreat to our respective houses if our ability to tolerate each other had completely wilted. Mom would relax her "kids outside" rule and let me binge on television with a bowl of ice cream in my lap. But first, I would hang my upper half over the a/c unit, letting the cold air billow my shirt.[4]

[4]D - There was no reason to be inside when I was a kid. It wasn't cooler and there was nothing interesting to do.

6. Sleeping downstairs felt like a campout with my parents. Mom and Dad's mattress went in the family room with the TV and I slept in the neighboring room that was a bit more formal and usually empty unless we spilled over into it during larger family gatherings. I liked that me and my parents were separated only by a set of interior glass-paned French doors and I could hear Johnny Carson through the pane broken out by my brother years before. [5]

[5]I also liked that, on those nights, when I woke up on the middle of the night, as I often did, and felt an eerie quietness in the house, I didn't have to sneak out of my room and into my parents' room. I didn't have to tiptoe to my mom's side of the bed (never my father's), hoping to go unnoticed while I watched for the rise and fall of her chest. I didn't have to endure her startled intake of breath at the sight of me (what must have been a frightening *Children of the Corn* moment) or her exasperation as she walked me back to my bedroom muttering, "Of course we're alive." Instead, I could just press my face up to one of the panes of glass, fogging it up, until I was satisfied that my parents were breathing.

7. We were holdouts when it came to central air. Dad told me it wouldn't work in our old house. He mumbled something about ductwork. He didn't mumble when he said there was no reason to worry about it or ask about it – the window unit was just fine. I stopped inviting friends for sleepovers during the hot days because it was a degrading amount of togetherness if we all needed to migrate downstairs.[6]

[6]Dad had central air installed when I was in college.
J – How did that work with the old ductwork? You told me it wouldn't work.
D – Aw, that's silly. You're not remembering right.

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Progress Note: Pt is a 23 y/o pleasant white female, newly employed social worker at the hospital who presents with intermittent abdominal pain in the right upper quadrant. Pt reports that she is a recently graduated MSW, continues to live an hour away, and commutes daily to her "first job out in the real world." Pt appears to be in good health, reports no recent changes in weight, and denies any other symptoms at this time. However, when specifically asked about bowel issues, pt admits a history of symptoms that coincide with irritable bowel syndrome, especially in new, stressful situations. Would expect pt's first job to certainly qualify as a trigger for her IBS.

Upon palpation of the described problem area, pt expresses some discomfort, grimacing slightly. No abnormalities noted.

Plan: Proceed with conservative tx at this time. Will provide pt with Metamucil samples and prescribe regimen of OTC fiber therapy, TID.

Progress Note: This pleasant, somewhat nervous young woman returns for a second visit with worsening RUQ pain and an additional complaint of pain spreading "sometimes" to the lower quadrant, same side. Pt reports that fiber therapy "isn't working at all" and worries that she's suffering from something more serious than IBS. After reassuring pt, she laughs

cautiously and appears relieved that she's "not dying of some belly tumor." When queried about the new stress in her life, pt states that her job situation is "more than I bargained for," and that she often works 60+ hrs per week. "The ER calls at night are the worst – driving back and forth twice in the same 24-hour period." When asked to describe the circumstances in which a social worker is needed in the middle of the night at the ER, pt hesitates then states, "That's just how it's done *here*. I mean, for instance, people are *supposed* to cry when a loved one dies. It's *normal.* If they have family or other support, do they really want a stranger, even if she's a social worker – or maybe especially if she's a social worker – trying to comfort them?"

Plan: Continue same fiber therapy with the addition of Dulcolax at bedtime for 3 days. Pt expresses concern about the effects of the treatment "hitting me at work." Will direct pt to a favorite haunt of mine on 2SW, around the corner from the often empty pediatric unit. Will explain that the door locks.

Progress Note: 3rd visit, same issue. Pt reports disappointing results from the tx for IBS, stating "not much is happening." Pt also states, "How much longer can I go on like this? Is it possible for a person's intestines to explode?" Despite laughter at her own inquiry, pt seems on the verge of tears, her voice shaky as she describes the ongoing stress. According to pt, her boss Debbie (Dir of SW at the hospital)

frequently leaves pt in charge while disappearing from the hospital for "hours on end" with Steve, the hospital's Risk Manager. Pt asks, "Haven't you heard the rumors?"

Pt vehemently denies failure to adhere to the treatment regimen. "I swear to God, I'm taking it all just like you prescribed. I even upped the Metamucil." This physician is beginning to wonder if a person's intestines can indeed explode.

Plan: Continue fiber therapy, discontinue Dulcolax. Will send pt home midday with prescription for 2 bottles of mag citrate and reassurance that it's physically impossible to resist the effects. In fact, she should take the next day off too as she will likely be confined to her bathroom. Will schedule follow-up appt for Tuesday. Hopefully pt will have some relief over her Labor Day holiday.

Progress Note: Pt here for follow-up visit. Pt describes results of continued fiber therapy with added mag citrate (2 bottles) as minimal. "What's wrong with me?" Pt denies experiencing a flare-up of this severity in the past. Pt denies any other change in routine aside from her new job. She reports regular rigorous exercise. No change in diet. Denies taking iron supplements or narcotics. Denies any drug use besides a daily vitamin (not a new regimen) and the occasional appropriate dose of acetaminophen for headache. Pt hesitates then states (blurts) that she has access to narcotics but doesn't take them. "My boss keeps mounds of them in her

top desk drawer, right where most people keep paper clips and pens." Pt explains that her boss has a supply, in different strengths, of Tylenol 3, Percocet, and "other stuff," offering them to pt when she's complained of a headache. "White, pink, blue, yellow, round, oval, pill, capsule – she has them all. Is that legal? That can't be legal." Pt's demeanor visibly changes as she discusses her work environment. She appears nervous, gripping the exam table and tearing the sanitary paper cover in the process. She seems eager to talk but uncertain if she should, which suggests further evidence that her stressful work environment is contributing to her unusually severe IBS episode. "There were no social work jobs where I live. I had to take this one. I didn't want to commute." Pt shakes her head. "Carl told me what it would be like. That the calls would be well beyond the scope of social work and that Debbie wanted it that way." (Carl, pt's predecessor, left his social work position at the hospital months ago, opting for early retirement. He was a good guy. Easy. Funny, too. Fished with him a few times. Never saw him as a patient…)

Pt describes her boss' fear that this hospital will follow in the footsteps of other hospitals, replacing social workers with nurse case managers who are cross-trained and cheaper to employ. "Can you get cheaper than what I'm paid per year for someone who is salaried and works this many hours a week?" Pt states she was "screwed from the get-go. Carl was a guy's guy and I'm no guy." Pt continues to grip the table, pausing and looking

away. "It was real comfortable to sit through Carl's going away party. A couple of the docs carried in a cake – the torso of a naked woman, complete with chocolate sprinkles, if you know what I mean. When I told Debbie, she laughed and said the home grown docs –no offense–take a little while to warm up to new folks but they would love me soon enough. Sure they will. I'm sure I'll get invited to go on rounds with the docs like Carl did and I'm sure they'll invite me to go fishing on the weekends. Sure they will. No offense." Informed pt that no offense was taken as this physician is from Vermont. Pt states that Carl told her about Debbie's husband, a former colleague of mine, who lost his license for prescribing himself narcotics.

"I guess that explains why she can't keep her stash at home. Her husband used to call Carl and ask if Debbie was sleeping with the Steve. Holy shit. What do you say to that?" Pt expresses her plan to go to administration if the situation with her boss continues. "I need the job, but this place…." Pt denies need for referral for counseling, stating, "It's just stress. Talking to you is fine."

Plan: Continue fiber therapy. Follow up in 3 days.

Progress Note: "I don't know if I can take this. Debbie figured out that I'd heard about her and Steve and they sat me down. They told me that the rumor was crazy and why didn't people understand that they were just friends? I mean, what do I look like? Twelve? Ok, I know. But seriously. She was

actually patting Steve's thigh when she said they were just friends. I mean, my office is right next to hers. He comes in slamming the door all the time and she talks him down, then it gets weirdly quiet for a while. Just friends. The other day? While I was left to cover the hospital? Someone spotted them in the *patient transport van*, parked on a back road. There's got to be a policy against that." Pt denies satisfactory resolution of constipation. "Yes, I'm taking the fiber. Do you know that Debbie called me at home the other night, drunk? She said she thinks someone is out to get her. It was so strange. She kept saying it - 'I think someone is out to get me.' She knows. She knows I went to administration. She was seeing if I would admit it to her. Steve probably put her up to it." Discussed the possibility of pursuing more invasive investigation of the problem. Pt states she's not quite ready for that; she'd like to return next week after she gives the fiber therapy another weekend to kick in "for real." Pt states, "Nobody wants to talk about this thing with Debbie anymore."

Plan: Continue current tx with the understanding that pt might need to consider more invasive measures of investigation. Will encourage pt to concentrate on medical issues during follow up visit next week or to accept referral for stress counseling.

Progress Note: Pt reports having had some relief. She states, "I'm not back to *normal*, but I'm better, which is a surprise." Pt explains that her job stress has actually increased. "Steve came to the Skilled Nursing unit the other

day. I was behind the dictation desk, so he didn't know I was there. The Skilled Nurse Manager was at the main desk and I heard Steve telling her that a patient had complained about me. He actually sounded *saddened* by it." Pt shakes her head. "What a jerk. Like I was some pet of his gone wrong." Pt appeared agitated. Encouraged pt to discuss the improved results of fiber therapy. "The best part was when I stood up and came from behind the dictation desk. He couldn't believe I was there. He actually stuttered when I said, 'Let's go see the patient right now.' The lady denied everything in front of him – no complaints whatsoever." Pressed pt about her fiber therapy results. "Yeah, I'm better. Steve didn't know what to do after that. It was great. I pulled out the patient's chart and started documenting everything in front of him. He left pretty quick. But then it hit me that they're trying to discredit me. This is my first real job. I'm not sure what to do." This physician explained that giving non-medical advice is outside of his scope. Suggested that pt no longer needs frequent follow up appts because her bowel issues have resolved. Pt hesitates before describing a new pain in her left lower quadrant. "It's been off and on for the past couple of days." Suggested that pt's pain requires a pelvic exam. As this physician does not perform pelvic exams, recommended Dr. Brennan, explaining that she's new and accepting pts. Pt was quiet for a moment but agreed that Dr. Brennan made sense as a "one-stop shop." Offered to have office staff schedule the first appt.

Plan: Will recommend continued fiber therapy as it seems to have had positive results. Will offer samples of Metamucil and wish pt well. Will turn regular care over to Dr. Brennan.

Progress Note: First appt with this pleasant 42 y/o long-time Director of Social Work at the hospital. Pt presents with complaints of back pain, stating, "It hurts all over." Pt guesses that she must have pulled a muscle helping patients in and out of the pt transport van. Pt states that she's tried Tylenol and Ibuprofen, but that "they're just not cutting the pain." Pt also states that she hasn't been able to rest her back because of increased work demands. "Our new social worker resigned, you know. I'll miss her – she was a sweet girl - but I think she was too young for this job."

Pt denies a supply of narcotics, stating that she threw the old ones away after recovery from her tubal ligation years ago. Pt states, "I only used what I needed to."

Plan: **…**

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I'd heard many stories over the years. Childhood stories. Immigration stories. First wife stories. But Marius had never talked about the revolution in Romania and I'd somehow removed him from it. For no reason at all that I can remember, I asked him about it one evening.

"I was scared," he said.

Our daughter ran into the kitchen asking for "*aminal"* crackers in a bowl so she could go back to playing with her farm in the family room. I enunciated "animal" back to her and Marius shot me a frown. I forgot that we'd agreed not to rush correct pronunciation. Marius kept threatening to put a brick on Elena's head. She'd plant her little fists on her hips and say, "That won't stop me from growing, Tati."

"Two bricks, then," he'd say. And so on.

I knew about the lines. Lines for bread, meat, toilet paper. An old woman who watched the streets from her apartment would call down to Marius and tell him he'd better get in line.

"For what?" he'd ask.

"What difference does it make?" She'd say, jutting her chin toward the next block. "People are getting in a line."

Marius and his first wife had a baby who needed milk. He would often start waiting at five in the morning. He was twenty-eight when his daughter was born and when his country's frustration spilled over into revolt. A protestant minister who spoke out from the pulpit against the dictator Ceausescu found himself in hot water for his open dissention. One mid-December evening, student parishioners gathered on the street by the minister's apartment and loudly supported him. Over the next hours and days, crowds swelled, anti-regime cries were born, a hole in the flag replaced the socialist republic coat of arms, and tanks came. Lines for food were momentarily overshadowed.

"I took a different route to work after it started," Marius said. "I stayed away from the gunfire."

Those words situated Marius amid gunfire, a thought in strange competition with the tap of plastic farm animals in the next room and the dry scrape of "aminal" crackers against a melamine bowl.

"You saw gunfire?" I asked.

"I heard it. Distantly. I stayed away. I've never been revolutionary."

Thank God, I thought. I'd forgotten my hands in hot dishwater and a clear line drew red across my knuckles. I dried them and turned my back to the sink, leaning against the counter like Marius. I struck his arms-crossed pose and let him talk for a while, hesitant to move or look at him in case it might shut him up.

"I was surprised somehow because it started suddenly, but we were aware of what was happening in other places." A private revolutionary, Marius had tuned in to Radio Free Europe late at night for news that wasn't available otherwise. He listened in bed to the news of Eastern Europe toppling, one government after another. He heard Romanians who'd escaped. They shouted across the shortwaves and Marius pumped his fist, but quietly—even in his own home—while they spoke freely, impassioned.

"We couldn't believe it. It was happening *peacefully* everywhere else. We had no such hopes under Ceausescu. He was delusional. All that stuff you see the North Koreans or Cubans doing on the news - all the choreographed marches and people holding up cards in stadiums to make huge picture tributes to 'The Great Leader.' We had to do all that. We had to practice and pretend we loved it. I couldn't imagine actually being free of it."

The 2004 Kerry/Edwards campaign train was scheduled to come through our town - Sedalia, MO. After work, Marius and I grabbed a quick supper and headed down to the Amtrak

station. The tracks served as a divider of parties – each side hawking their buttons and bumper stickers. Somebody said there were snipers on the station roof and secret service agents in our midst. I saw a couple of well-dressed gentlemen slowly pacing the station, their faces devoid of expression.

A guy in a waffle suit kept us entertained. The suit was made of foam and looked like it'd been kicked around in the dirt awhile before he'd pulled it on. The floppiness put him off-balance and the guy didn't look entirely sure why he was wearing it.

Midwest stoicism trumped political leanings when we had only each other to spout them at. We waited for hours and by the time the train pulled in, the pent-up crowd was plenty ready to express itself. Waffle suit came alive, yelling "Waffler!" while tottering on his side of the tracks. The crowd drowned him out with competing shouts of Four More Years! vs Three More Months! The candidates emerged, uncertain of their welcome. They took turns asking to be heard, before eventually admonishing the crowd for its lack of manners. "My children are on this train," John Edwards said.

When Missouri's own Claire McCaskill came out to speak, I got caught up in the electricity of my first political rally. I woo-hoo'd during Claire's pauses and stood up on a bench to shake my new button in support. To keep from toppling off the bench, I put my hand on Marius' shoulder and felt him laughing. I assumed he was amused by my uncharacteristic enthusiasm, but when I looked down he wasn't laughing. He was trembling head to toe.

"I went to work – I think it was December seventeenth or eighteenth, the day after the students started that first riot. I didn't believe it would go beyond that. But around mid to late-morning I heard the crowd coming."

December was unusually warm that year. A nurse opened a window and the sound of a commotion carried in on a clammy breeze. Curious, Marius and several other staff members went outside to see a huge flood of people marching their way.

"The cardiology hospital where I worked was across the street from the local communist headquarters. Soldiers were already in place – mostly young men with guns. Some of them looked too young for the task. I thought about what a terrible position they were in. If Ceausescu ordered them to fire, they'd have to shoot their own people."

Marius noticed a group of children heading up the mob. He thought they might be serving as an appeal to the better nature of the soldiers. Would they shoot children? Sunlight ricocheted off something on children's chests and Marius squinted. Keys hung around their necks, just like the one Marius used to wear to get into his family's apartment after school. A key around the neck was safer than a key in the pocket or a key left behind. As the crowd began to shout, Marius became afraid of what he might see.

When Marius was twenty-eight, waiting in lines and avoiding gunfire, I was seventeen. School wound down to Christmas break. Mom and I dipped anything we deemed qualified into melted chocolate – peanuts, crispy Asian noodles, pretzels, peanut butter sandwiched between Ritz crackers. We went to Christmas Eve services without fear of someone marking our presence there as subversive. After church, I went to my best friend's house and watched her open exactly twenty-two presents while her parents fought about the stuff her dad had hurriedly bought her mom at Wal-Mart a few hours earlier.

On Christmas morning, twenty-five of my extended family members came for breakfast. After eating our way through bacon, eggs, biscuits and gravy, we settled around the big table and

fought the big issues. My dad and his siblings hotly argued politics and social issues while most of the married-in folk watched warily or retreated to the family room.

During a lull, my Aunt Mary turned to me and posed a question. "Imagine you're a Jewish woman in a concentration camp and one of the German soldiers promises to return you safely to your family if you agree to have sex with him. Would you?"

I called upon movie scenes to inform the imagining. "Absolutely not," I answered, sure about death over compromise.

Aunt Mary smiled triumphantly, orangey makeup carved into her crow's feet, and I knew I'd gotten it wrong.

"I would," she said.

"Why?"

"Who cares about a little sex. I'd just want to get home to my family."

She waved off her grown children's commentary. "Mom, her family's already dead – they didn't round up the odd Jew here and there." "Mom, why would the soldier bargain with her in the first place? He'd probably just rape her."

"My point is that when we're young, our resolutions are hollow because they're untested," she said.

I decided that if the occasion arose, I would have sex with the German soldier because Aunt Mary said, and I would loathe him the rest of my life. I would tell no one because that kind of secret loathing is more dramatic.

Later that evening, after my siblings took their over-tired kids home, Christmas letdown set in. It would be a whole year before we could do this all over again. The chocolate, the presents, the table, the sex with soldiers.

"Did they fire at the crowd?"

"No, not then. They waited until evening, but I didn't see anything. The next morning, my colleagues dragged the body of an eighteen year-old girl in off the street, but I'd already gone home." That day, though, the soldiers held and the crowd dispersed peacefully. Marius went back inside the hospital to continue his on-call shift through the night.

"I remember smelling *clor*," he hesitated, "…bleach, when I came back inside." The smell had comforted him. I assumed the bleach was used to clean floors or bathrooms.

"We had to boil the needles between each use. There were no disposable syringes. No latex gloves. Over time, those needles became bent and dull. It was no small thing to get a shot." He smiled at me.

We relaxed our rigid positions at the kitchen counter. The skin on my hands felt tight after the hot dishwater. I flexed my fingers. "Why haven't you told me these things before now?"

"You never specifically asked before now." Marius shrugged. "I don't think about those days, much. It was a strange, exciting time that turned into a really disappointing time and then I left. My life here became much more important than a revolution that pretty much led to communists in new hats moving into power."

I didn't want the end yet, though. I wanted to hear what he saw and heard and felt. I wanted to know about the holes cut in the flag, and Ceausescu's execution. I wanted to know everything I didn't know about this guy I married more than a decade ago. The guy who ducked behind the cart in Wal-mart every Saturday to avoid detection by a chatty patient became the guy

who'd circumvented the normal route to work because an army was firing on his fellow countrymen.

"I'll tell you the last part of that day and then I'm putting this kid to bed." He nodded toward Elena who was still playing in the family room. "That night on call I went to the window to see if the soldiers were still there. For hours I watched them unload the communist headquarters. They filled trucks with boxes of files – surveillance on the people – and drove it all away. The next day, after I'd gone home, the people came back angry and risked their lives to storm an empty building."

"Weren't you worried you would just happen upon a crowd even as you were trying to avoid one and get shot anyway?"

"Yes," Marius said. "Especially considering where my hospital was located."

Marius was scheduled to work the day after the crowds stormed the empty headquarters. They tore pictures off the walls and tried to burn the place down. Marius sat uncertainly in his apartment after calling in to work. He'd talked to an older physician who said it was probably safer to come in. "If you're not here, they'll assume you're out there. They're checking." Marius didn't have to ask who "they" were. The colleague whispered these things into the phone and Marius knew that the *Securitate* had a presence in the hospital. Later, after making his way to work, Marius found a man seated near the nurses' station. The man had arrived at the hospital hours earlier, complaining of vague symptoms and demanding to be admitted. He didn't even pretend to carry on with the symptoms and the staff ignored him as best they could. Everyone knew he wasn't really a patient. Everyone knew not to question him about it.

"I heard stories about the county hospital – *Spitalul Judetean*. After dark, the staff would go out and drag the injured in off the street. They'd stitch them up only to find them in their

beds later, shot in the head. Or in the morgue, or gone altogether. I don't know how many bodies disappeared."

Twelve years before talk of revolution, my mom, sisters, and sister-in-law spent the night in my crappy little apartment in Columbia, MO. We usually met in Kansas City for our annual Christmas shopping day, but that year they decided to save me the drive and turn it into a weekend. I'd recently finished grad school and commuted to my first real hospital job in Moberly where I'd met a man who'd become important.

My sisters were comparing coupons for Macy's and Kohl's while Mom made breakfast. The square cutout in the wall dividing the living room and the kitchen framed her. She looked like a short-order cook flipping pancakes. She must have felt like one, too because she called "Order up" when the first batch was ready. My sisters took plates back into the family room, but I hovered behind Mom and watched her flip a pancake too soon. Dots of batter splattered my mustard-colored stove. I took a plate and followed my sisters, sinking cross-legged to the floor, my back against the blue plaid daybed/couch.

"So, I've been seeing someone," I said.

Mom looked up, her spatula in the air. She smiled expectantly. Karen, my oldest sister hummed a little laugh because she already knew about Marius. Mom's smile faltered.

Mom glanced from me to Karen and back. "Yeah?"

"He's a little older," I said.

"How much older?"

"He's thirty four." I was twenty three.

"Really? Thirty four?" Mom said. Her spatula drooped a bit.

"He's a doctor I work with. From Romania."

"*Rea*lly?"

"Tell her the other thing," Karen said.

I shot her a look. "He has a daughter," I said.

"Oh, Jennifer," Mom said, frowning.

"Not that thing," Karen sing-songed.

"And he's still a little married," I said in a rush.

"Married!" The spatula dropped from Mom's hand and she looked down to dig it out of the batter. "Married?"

"It's an arrangement, though." The explanation bounced back all cliché. "Listen, it's complicated. But the divorce is final in January."

Mom was absent in her short-order window. I heard the sound of running water. It stopped and she came in drying her hands on one of my ratty dishtowels that used to be hers.

"Jennifer, when did he *start* the divorce?"

"Long, long long before me. Listen."

"Oh, I'm listening."

Suddenly I didn't have anything to say. It wasn't really necessary. The only reason Marius wasn't waking up with me that morning was because of my family sleepover. I would move in with him in a few weeks, after the divorce became final. He sounded like the other side of the world, but he felt like home.

***

In 1994, I was an undergraduate social work student sitting in a marriage and family class. The instructor was beloved, a wise mother to us all. She had smooth dark skin, long slim fingers, and a soothing voice. After visiting the statistics on likelihood of marital success—common backgrounds, similar education levels, culture, race, religion, etc.—she moved on to the more specific example of how a marriage can be brought down by a turkey.

"Your husband's mother fixes a turkey one way, maybe oven-roasted with spices and stuffing inside the cavity, and your mother has always fixed it another way, maybe soaked it in brine overnight or deep-fried." She paced the room, her striking hands annotating her spiel. "Come Thanksgiving, he wants his mother's turkey and you want your mom's turkey. Neither one of you will budge." She seemed to know a lot about this and I recalled hearing that she was divorced. Take those quotes with a grain of salt, but I'm not far off. I was transfixed. I pondered marriage and vowed to compromise on the turkey.

Visions of my future husband danced fleetingly through my young head. The blur of him left a streak of blondish hair in its wake. I gathered that he looked and sounded familiar. We probably even knew some of the same people. We would mostly likely meet at a BBQ in somebody's back yard, one of us invited by a friend of a friend. People would play rowdy volleyball over a net tied to flimsy poles wedged in the ground or anchored by bags of sand if the somebody's dad was picky about his lawn. There'd be a keg in the garage and folding tables with lemonade, iced tea, bags of chips, and a variety of salads with mayonnaise in common. The two of us (blond future husband and I) would stand in the shade of the garage while he played nice guy manning the keg.

I might tell him about the time when my best friend Steph accidentally drove us into a cornfield on New Year's Eve as we were taking that big smiling curve between Higginsville and Corder. He'd say that (no way!) he and some buddies almost lost it on that curve, too. We'd make fun of each other's high school tastes in music and alcohol. I'd feed him embarrassing information to keep the conversation going—maybe capitalize on the New Year's Eve story. Tell him I was in the back seat between Fipi, our foreign exchange student from Portugal who'd endured weekends with her friends in Paris before coming to the Midwest, and Chad, a junior boy who'd talked his way into the car. How I capped the 2-liter bottle of Purple Passion Fipi held between her knees in that strangely long moment before the little blue Citation went airborne over the ditch. How I even had time to grip the oh-shit handle and register that Milli Vanilli serenaded our near-deaths with *Blame it on the Rain*. Future husband would laugh in recognition and affectionate derision.

We would certainly never let anything as trivial as a turkey come between us.

His mom would buy me sweaters from the Gap for Christmas and teach me how to make a mean margarita. She'd embarrass Kurt or Brian or some-such-name-husband with old girlfriend stories and wink at me behind his back. His dad would smile fondly across the table and give me one-armed hugs on our way out the door. They'd probably be Methodists and there'd be less than an hour between our parents' houses. Surely he wouldn't be from Kansas; my Missouri roots would not suffer the culture shock.

A few years later, Thanksgiving rolled around. Blond future husband had been replaced by Marius, whose parents lived well over an hour away. Turkey was on my brain. I asked

Marius—supposing they'd had occasion to—how they'd fixed a turkey back home in Romania. Of course, I envisioned a packaged bird from the freezer section at the nearest grocery store.

Sure, they'd fixed turkeys, he said.

"We used to kill one in the bathtub before the New Year. I held it down and my father cut its throat." He shook his head. "I didn't enjoy it much. My father had to saw at the neck while the bird thrashed around and my father yelled at me to hold it still. I thought about that later, when we were eating it."

The turkey wasn't likely to come between us. Marius didn't care how it was seasoned or in what manner I wanted it cooked. He was just relieved that he didn't have to kill it with his bare hands.

My own relief was misplaced. I didn't know myself well enough yet to be happy about avoiding the too-familiar future I had already envisioned, the conversations I had already anticipated. Instead, I felt the sort of satisfaction only a 23 year-old can feel when she holds an imaginary pen over a much less imaginary list…

turkey

different upbringings

different cultures

different languages

a pretty significant age difference

different religious practices

…and she marks off turkey.

***

Marius greeted me at the door, resplendent in royal blue sweatpants that were slightly too short and a tucked-sharp forest green t-shirt, that like most of his t-shirts as I would soon learn, advertised a medication. Black chest hair curled out at the neck. I'd never been to his duplex and the only time I'd seen him outside of a dress shirt, tie, khakis and a lab coat was our official first date the previous weekend when he wore dark jeans and a deep blue oxford. Date may be the wrong word; it was more a confession of his circumstances: almost divorced but still married. His attire and curling chest hair gave him a Guido air minus the attitude.

I slipped off my pumps at the door in case Romanians expected this courtesy in their homes. Plus, his duplex was all shades of white – white walls, cream trim, off-white counters, light beige carpet. Later I would learn that when it rained, water seeped in at the foundation, turning the edges of the first floor carpet dark beige. The row of identical shoddy 2-story duplexes faced an expanse of grassy field and was probably erected in the shortest time possible. But compared to my dated, roach infested 1-bedroom apartment, the duplex looked modern and airy and unaffordable.

Marius stepped back from the door and swept an arm toward his living room. "There's a couch now," he said.

I smiled, remembering an awkward moment in the hospital cafeteria several days before. He'd told me I should come to his apartment now that he had a couch. It had sounded inadvertently flirtatious and we'd both fallen silent along with several colleagues at our table.

I politely admired the only source of color in the room. "It's nice. Where did you sit before?"

He demonstrated, lowering himself to the floor in front of the couch that was meant to represent the wall. "Like this on the flat cardboard box from my entertainment center. The remote was here, the phone here," he said, pointing at the carpet to his left. Pausing for effect before pointing to the carpet on his right, he said, "My beer was here." We laughed. I mentally revised his wording to *flattened* cardboard box, realizing that I'd been doing so through our every conversation. He'd asked me to correct his English for him so he could learn faster, but I never did. Not yet.

He hopped up and seemed at a loss for a moment. I realized he didn't know what to do with me in his territory and I didn't know how to help him. I wanted to extend this lovely pre-intimate suspense and, at the same time, fast-forward through it.

Marius walked quickly to the wall across from the couch where the TV sat on an otherwise empty entertainment center. He knocked. "Listen. It's hollow. The walls are so thin. You can't even throw the remote – it goes right through." I looked for signs of a repair job but he must have meant it as a prediction rather than a known fact. "The walls in Romania are like this." He held his hands apart like a fisherman stretching the truth about his catch. "And they're not made from cardboard." I nodded and smiled, but failed to comment.

"Did you eat?" He asked. His eyes were very round and capped by dark, sharp eyebrows, lending contrast to his expression. Round, sharp, round, sharp.

I'd come straight from my night class at the local community college where I taught sign language to an eclectic group of adults: a mother and daughter who wanted to learn for fun, a policeman who was going deaf, and handful of others no longer defined in my memory. They're like the faceless, muted people being removed from Jim Carrey's memory in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I can conjure a shirt, but no face, curly hair above blank space, hands poised

to sign in front of nondescript torsos. It was late and I was starving but I hesitated to answer Marius. He didn't wait for a response, moving quickly through the kitchen pulling pans and plates, each covered in a neat square of paper towel, from the oven and microwave. He'd cooked me chicken schnitzel, french fries, and broccoli. He reached into the fridge for a jar of dill pickles and placed everything on the white plastic patio furniture that served as his dining set. Propelled by an impulse to be bold or maybe to break the tension, I stepped into the kitchen and opened his freezer where I found nothing more than a pyramid stack of cellophane-wrapped burritos and an empty ice tray. I felt Marius looking at me but he stayed silent. I glanced back at him and the feast he'd made me and wondered how long he'd wandered the grocery store.

The white duplex felt like a place I'd want to come back to and suddenly Marius looked just right in his sweats. The awkwardness was reduced to anticipation alone. I glanced into the bedroom off the kitchen and saw a mattress and box springs under a generic blue comforter. On one side of the bed, a plain lamp sat on an upturned box. I smiled and joined Marius at the table.

Fifteen years later, we reminisced about that evening. I remembered him being more on edge than I was.

"Why were you so uncomfortable?" I asked.

"I didn't know why you would want to come over so late."

"You invited me! I told you I couldn't come until after class and you said fine."

"I know. I wanted to see you but I just didn't know what Americans mean by coming over. I didn't know if I should feed you but I was afraid *not* to feed you. I didn't know what Americans eat…or what they do."

His eyes were very round, capped off by dark, sharp eyebrows shot through with white.

***

Maya Angelou once said something to the tune of: *When someone tells you who they are, believe them.*

"I live here, but I'll always be Romanian," Marius told me. We were walking the polished streets of Palm Springs, a day trip from San Diego during our first vacation together. I must have appreciated the drive in, from desert to oasis, but the day quickly turned to an angry march through downtown. I recall the chipped coral polish on my toes and the slap of my sandals against the pavement. The other memories are reduced to concentric layers of color—gray pavement at the core, a layer of shocking green, a wide ring of yellow desert. I remember the pavement best.

"Yes, I know," I said.

"You don't know. You have no idea."

"Why are you mad all of a sudden?"

"I'll always be mad."

"So I'll have to live with an *always* angry man?"

"Yes."

"Our children will have an angry father *always*."

"Yes."

"This is crazy—you're vowing to be in a bad mood for the rest of your life."

"In a generation or two, this won't matter. But I'm not second-generation, or third. I'm an immigrant. I will always be Romanian."

I played Polly Anna with every reply. The argument eventually lost heat and momentum, and at some point he apologized for being "impossible." Our legs grew tired and we wandered into shops. I tried on an orange swimsuit with fringe that would later give me weird tan lines but when I shimmied in it we laughed, so I bought it.

On the drive home the sky turned to sand, whipping against our car like ice and sending us to the refuge of an outlet mall. We found a men's store and bought some new shirts. They wore well on him. He looked updated. I discounted the argument as a dramatic anomaly, and therefore not predictive.

"I think it looks better untucked," I said of one shirt.

"Really? Like this?" Marius appraised his reflection.

"Yes, that's much better."

We left the desert updated. Reset. Not long afterwards, we began talking about getting married in the fall. Little did I know then, those years ago, that there are 1,001 ways to say:

"You should have married _____."

A. A Romanian

B. An American

C. Your father.

D. Anyone else.

***

My father often re-told a story. He, Billy, was eight years old in 1939 when his uncle took him and two of his siblings to see a new film. He remembered sitting utterly still, gripping

the seat with both hands as life changed in a flourish. Sepia slipped away like an old skin, as forgotten as days of plenty in that moment when Dorothy stepped from her murderous house into Munchkinland.

"It was just amazing. We'd never seen anything in color before. The audience actually gasped." The memory coursed through my father, almost revealing the boy he'd been. His white hair and thick bifocals lodged him in the present.

One evening, months before our trip to Romania, Marius and I sat on the couch in our cardboard duplex watching TV. Our mugs, empty of ice cream, sat on the end table while the trace remnants warmed under the lamp, scenting the room with chocolate.

Contrary to gender norms, I owned the remote and my goal was to avoid all commercials. I muttered about a conspiracy when the programs I flipped between ran simultaneous commercials. I wondered if this habit would become the turkey in our relationship.

Marius stopped me. "Wait—go back." He reached for the remote but I automatically pulled it out of reach. He huffed but settled for waving a hand to the left a couple of times at the screen.

"What channel?" I asked.

He waved until I hit it. "That one." He leaned toward the TV and a look of wonder wiped his face clean of all adulthood. Rowlf banged away on a piano, his fat fuzzy paws banging out clean notes, while Fozzy Bear horsed around in the background. *Waka, waka.*

"Fozzy Bear was my favorite," Marius said in a soft, wistful voice.

I wanted to laugh, but it felt wrong, irreverent even. He was lost in memory. "You guys had the Muppets in Romania?"

"For a while, yeah, through a Yugoslavian channel." He paused to smile faintly, eyes glued to the screen. "But I've never seen them in color before."

I had little reference yet for Marius' "before" life, but this night it struck me. "When did you first see color TV?"

Marius responded without looking at me. "1986, at Nelu's house."

I didn't ask who Nelu was because I wasn't really in the room with Marius as far as he was concerned. A small thing in the big picture of our differences, the moment still managed to tingle the air. I left Marius to his memories and sat back, watching the Muppets in color.

Our friend Ligia holds court at every party. She tells the stories.

"Let me tell you about our first television. We didn't have enough money to buy a color TV so we went together with three other couples to purchase one. We made a schedule: each couple kept the TV for three months at a time."

Ligia leans back and calls for Sorin. She punctuates her words rather than her sentences, accenting with feeling.

"Sorin! Where. Are. You. Sorin. Oh, hello my love! I have a problem. Sorin. My glass is dry. Can you kindly pour us some more Prosecco? Or, Jennifer – would you like Vinho Verde instead? Or a margarita?"

"Sure, sure," says Sorin. Even though he is always up and down fetching something for us, his voice holds an apology as if he's been a poor host, not fetching my drink sooner.

"Jennifer? What would you like?"

There's a tray in front of me with the hard stuff I've already refused – four or five bottles of liquor in various shades. My own flute of sparkling wine sits half full and I point to it. "Nope, I'm still good."

Sorin brings in a new bottle and tops me off anyway before filling Ligia's glass to just below the rim. Ligia's mom carries in a plate of *saratele* – long, salty sticks of baked dough with embedded caraway seeds and browned cheese. I take one, knowing I won't to stop until half the plate is gone. *Saratele* are culinary crack.

Ligia thanks her mother in Romanian and tells her to sit down.

"Mama. Relax. Sit. I'm telling Jennifer about the television Sorin and I shared with our friends. Remember?"

Her mother lowers herself carefully, recovering from a recent fall. She's eighty-six and does all the cooking, yard work, and most of the cleaning since moving from Romania several years ago after Ligia's dad died. She has a glass eye and unreliable hearing, but she rarely stops moving. She accepts a glass from Sorin while Ligia holds court.

"Was it hard to give the TV up once you got used to having it for a few months?" I ask.

Ligia speaks slowly in both languages, weighting the words, laughing loudly and often. She likes her own stories and jokes as well as anyone listening, frequently throwing in idioms – some ours, some Romanian, some a mixture of both.

"Oh. Well. We. Did. Not. Care. A deal's a deal! And we were just happy to have one. Listen. So much of the time you couldn't find anything on the television but Ceausescu ranting—"

Someone across the room chimes in with an impression of the infamous dictator's speech. Everyone laughs drily. Whenever the regime is mentioned, the tone in the laughter changes. Smiles are wry and eyes roll.

"—ha ha, yeah. That's just what he sounded like." Ligia shudders for us.

I wait, knowing Ligia will get back around to her story. She can be distracted, following a tangent for some time, but she never completely loses the thread. It might come back suddenly, apropos of nothing relevant to recent conversation, but it will come back. Today she resists the tangent but not the wine. Romanian words start to replace the English ones. She begins dropping the articles.

"*Problema a fost* winter, when we had to give up the television to the next couple. At first snow, Ceausescu shut down the streets until spring. Government vehicles only. If it snowed in *Noiembrie*? Tough luck for you. But, a deal's a deal. So. Sorin and I would carry the *televisor* down to the *strada*, wrap it in blankets and fix – tie? – it to a, a, a – *cum se spune*…how do you call – sled."

Sorin starts hinting that she's had enough, but he refills her glass when she glares and insists. I don't know what it was like before the cancer, but in the time I've known Ligia, I haven't seen anyone refuse her wishes. Just beyond the five year mark – the milestone after which chances of recurrence drop statistically – Ligia found a lump on her sternum. Her best friend, also Marius' best friend, is an oncologist and manages her experimental treatment. The night he came to confirm her diagnosis, they drank bottles of wine together, cried, and then jumped into Ligia's pool fully clothed. Everything about Ligia's attitude since then suggests, *What's one more glass of wine?*

The story about the television is a favorite of mine, although negligible compared to some of her others. It's a small representation of the time, place and circumstances. I can hold it up to my own history and say, "Wow, we had four televisions in our house." to which Ligia replies, "Were they all in color?"

I often think of Ligia and Sorin pulling the one-quarter-theirs television through the quiet streets of Bucharest. A government car might go by. Does it give them pause? When they start walking again, are they thinking of the next nine months, the newly acquired silence in their apartment? They're not yet thinking of revolution or America or cancer. It'll be years before they meet Marius or any of our other friends in the room, years before Marius discovers the Muppets in color.

I hear their steps echo across the snow, accompanied by the sled cutting its path. They don't know me yet, but I know them. I watch them walk awhile.

***

"She's a tough woman," Marius said. His face wore resignation and his shoulders slumped at the prospect of my learning this about his mother firsthand.

We lingered in his car as the garage door whined shut behind us, weeks away from my first trip to Romania. Marius was taking me home to meet his parents before our wedding the following month. I was more nervous about flying over a vast ocean than I was about meeting Ana and Constantin, but Marius did his best to reorder my worries. While he gloomed, I became a heightened version of myself, like I was playing my character on stage: a twenty-four year-old

child depicting a grown up woman on the verge of marriage. I portrayed a prematurely smug readiness.

"What about your father?" I asked.

"Oh, he'll love you. My father has always been more of a friend." The happy statement didn't alter his anxiety though. He remained resigned and slumped, and I had a hard time taking him seriously. Surely he was overdramatizing.

"So, what's so tough about her?" I asked. I was from a family of talkers. If you asked a question, you got a life story in return. We radiated the need to talk. When someone else talked, our mouths opened and closed like gasping fish in anticipation of our turn. We talked over, around and through each other, nobody really listening—just a bunch of people making louder and louder points in our hard-wired attempts to prove our rightness. Even now it's hard to discern cultural difference from personality when it comes to Marius' stronghold on personal information.

"She's a Romanian mother, but she's extreme even by those standards." He sighed and shrugged.

"I'll win her over," I said, winking. He attempted a smile but his eyes didn't follow suit.

The journey was long and I was travel weary in the extreme. St. Louis became Detroit. Detroit became Amsterdam. Amsterdam became Budapest. Budapest introduced a sour-smelling man, an in-law of Marius' sister, who graciously drove six hours to pick us up. The combination of a long, lonely road and losing familiarity with Marius as he slipped into his native skin made me feel younger and clingy and inconceivably far from home. I asked questions just to hear him speak English.

I'd laughed when Marius told me we needed cigarettes for bribing, but the border between Hungary and Romania taught me that the old ways were not yet dead. Sweaty guards in starched uniforms frowned over our luggage and passports until Marius offered the magic number of cartons. As we crossed into Romania, I didn't know whether to feel relieved or locked in.

Riding through Timisoara for the first time was an experience in darkness. I searched the midnight streets for evidence of Marius' assurance that his home city housed more than 350,000 people. Rare, dim streetlights made the city seem darker.

We pulled to an abrupt stop and the trip reached a scary new phase. I was about to meet my soon-to-be in-laws. I wasn't worried about Marius' father.

She's a tough woman.

I double-kissed and thanked the man who drove us. My smile felt empty around the edges, the kind with a broken connection between the eyes and the mouth. We looked up to shouts from above where a woman leaned her upper half through a third-story window, waving madly at us. She wore glasses and her short, dark hair curled softly around her beaming face. Did I imagine that moonlight bounced off of a crown on her tooth, adding a surreal, fairytale quality to her smile? Did she twinkle?

"*Bine ati venit!*" she called, still waving.

Welcome.

The apartment was larger than I expected. One long hallway with rooms for appendages—bedroom, kitchen and pantry along the left, another bedroom, dining room/TV room and a third bedroom on the right. The hallway dead-ended at two bathrooms, side by side,

one just a toilet and sink, the other large and blue-tiled with tub, sink, toilet, bidet and a relic of a washing machine. A balcony, partially enclosed in glass, ran the length of the kitchen and adjacent bedroom. Marius never lived in this apartment but he helped build it. There was no buying on credit in Romania; whatever money they could sock aside for the month added another layer to the construction. A floor here, a wall there, and so on for thirteen years before Ana and Constantin could move in. I'd known this but forgot, and I found myself deconstructing the childhood scenes I'd been imagining in these rooms.

A massive, intricately carved bookshelf spanned one wall of the dining/TV room. Family pictures decorated an eye-level shelf. Marius posed carefully alongside a short-haired girl with huge eyes. Each wore a crown of tiny flowers and a piece of cloth, like a bandana, tied at the neck. Marius explained that this was the communist garb for kids, uniforms for little red versions of boy scouts and girl scouts in training. Another photo showed Marius and Dana preserved in black and white. Marius and his sister are not close and it was strange to see them side by side, smiling together, young and still nuclear. I asked about them as children.

The family of four lived in a six hundred square-foot apartment, like most everyone else. Concrete rectangles of Communist ingenuity degraded a country whose capital was once compared to Paris. Ana was in the kitchen with the door closed. Three beds, two armoires, two tables, six chairs, a vanity, and a storage cabinet carved a tight maze through the front two rooms where Marius, aged nine and Dana, aged four, were playing. Marius spied a hairpin and asked Dana to sit on the floor. She was due for an ear cleaning and Marius' medical career began. He wanted to know how far the pin would go.

"I was frantic to console her," he told me. "She screamed and screamed and I knew my mother would come."

"What did she do?"

"Hit me, of course." Marius described a breathless, sweating Ana who stopped hitting only when she had to rest. He said Dana stopped crying to watch.

That night long ago, Marius feigned sleep. He felt his mother cross the room and tried to keep his face slack. Her fingers brushed through his hair. She stooped to kiss his forehead and lingered. He didn't have to worry about his face anymore.

Ana moved to Dana's bed, her lily-of-the-valley soap trailing behind. Marius treasured his sister's turn because he could sneak open an eye to see a warmth that so rarely touched Ana's features during the day. She was especially tender after days like today. He decided that she loved him.

We were on the street, Ana and I. Romania embedded itself in my sense of smell. The gray-black cough from pre-emission standard cars reminded me of hanging my head out of our vinyl-laden brown bomber for a whiff of fumes at the gas station when I was a child. Yeasty steam wafted up from bakeries nestled below street level where crusty bread baked in clay ovens. Sour cabbage in tomato sauce, sour bodies. Years later, Ana told me that America has no smell.

Marius made plans to meet with old colleagues at the hospital where he trained and I was left to fend for myself for a few hours. We ran into a cousin of Ana's near one of the tram stations.

Romanian is no easy language. Although my years of studying Spanish helped with the Latin derived vocabulary, grammar proved tricky. Articles were tacked onto the ends of words, for instance, and plurals often sounded like a record skipping or an impossible breath of a barely pronounced "i" trailing off. But the effects of immersion were startling; my comprehension

stretched beyond Marius' slow, familiar speech to Ana's more formal speech, for which Marius often chastised her ("Mica, speak normal if you want her to understand!). Ana greeted her cousin with a complicated smile—a fusion of politeness, embarrassment, apology, and something a little like anger. While I prepared to stumble through pleasantries, Ana told him that I was a friend of Marius, but her tone suggested that I was a piece of baggage he'd picked up in America and dumped on them rebelliously. The cousin glanced at me and hesitantly asked about Marius' wife. Ana told him the wife was back in Cleveland. No mention that Marius divorced nearly a year ago. No mention that we were to be married in a month. I smiled shakily and held out my hand, but the tremble in my lip infuriated me.

Ana turned a critical eye on my dinner attire. We were meeting a couple of Marius' friends and former colleagues at a restaurant that September evening and the sporty jacket I'd packed diminished my black skirt and heels.

"*O sa gasesc ceva mai bun,*" she said and disappeared high on purpose into her bedroom, talking to herself along the way.

"She's finding you something better. She thinks Dana left a few things that might fit," Marius translated.

Ana marched back in the room, cream suit jacket in hand. She slipped it over my arms and turned me like a mannequin. The lining felt slick and clammy. She smiled at her choice. "*Merge, nu*?"

"*Da*," I said. "Uh, *merge*." It'll work.

Ana drew a footless ironing board from its cubby beside Constantin's bed and placed it on the dining room table. If not for the electric cord, although yellowed and brittle, the iron

could not have been mistaken for anything modern. As it heated, Ana rushed around—in with a damp towel she spread smooth on the board, out to fill a spray bottle with water, back in to position the already pristine jacket over the board.

"Tell her it looks fine, that she doesn't need to iron it for me."

Marius shot me a look. "I will not tell her that. You don't want me to tell her that," he said drily.

Ana chattered throughout the process, giving me a lesson in ironing old-world style. A soccer game played faintly in the next room where Constantin, I suspected, prolonged his afternoon rest to avoid us. Ana completed her ceremony by carefully draping the steaming jacket over my arm. I over-thanked her and headed for the refuge of our bedroom. On the way, I glanced up to find Constantin hovering in his doorway, watching me come down the hall with one arm held at an awkward extension in deference to the jacket that might have been made of glass. My mistake was lifting my eyes to acknowledge him with a smile. Heels, area rug and a lifelong lack of grace converged for a slow-mo moment. The jacket went down and in my haste to retrieve it, I stomped right on it. I yanked reflexively before stepping off, smudging the length of one cream sleeve. Constantin and I both turned to check the hallway behind me, freezing like children hiding in plain sight, but Ana barely glanced our direction as she crossed to the kitchen.

Eyes locked back on each other, I pulled a finger to my lips with a frantic "Shhhh!" Constantin dropped his gaze in an unmistakable message—*I never saw you*—before turning and shutting his door. I wondered if he stopped fighting his smile on the other side.

I hid in our room until I felt composed. Thankfully, the smudge was on the underside of the sleeve and I managed to rub it mostly invisible. I emerged to brush my hair and check my make-up but Ana was at the bathroom mirror. The door was ajar and she caught me in the

reflection before I could sneak away. She waved me in, "*Vino*, Jennifer, *vino*!" She pronounced my name, Jen-EE-fare.

We shared the mirror in the blue-tiled bathroom that Marius helped design as a teenager. A bidet sat beside the toilet, reminding me of a scene from Crocodile Dundee during which Dundee is stumped by a bidet's purpose—boot washer, maybe? Marius walked up behind us.

"Look at us," she told him. "Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law getting ready together!" She smiled into the mirror. I warmed to the gushy acceptance, her earlier dismissal of me as Marius' friend dissipating into happy amnesia.

I smiled back at her reflection and thought, *She's not so tough.*

A carpet of flowers stretched between the Opera house and the Orthodox Cathedral anchoring each end of the Piata Operei in Timisoara. Old men straddled the benches lining either side of the carpet and rehashed the latest soccer match over their backgammon boards. It was my first European city and I was struck giddy with awe. Marius had scoffed at any mention of an old building in the U.S. and now I saw why; the structures surrounding me were already old before America began cutting its teeth.

I exclaimed, clasped my hands, twirled a bit. Marius held me in place to point out pockmarks on some of the buildings where bullets gouged permanent reminders of the 1989 revolution. He was proud that his city began the uprising several days before Bucharest, the capital, joined in. "We started it," he always said.

Ana hung back while Marius took pictures. In wry amusement, he posed me in front of a blaringly red and yellow McDonald's at one corner of the square. "This definitely wasn't here,"

he said, rolling his eyes. Ana asked for a translation but missed the humor. It's a popular, expensive restaurant, she told him.

While they bickered over McDonald's, I went back to open-mouthed amazement at my surroundings. "I can't believe I'm here. It's beautiful!" I opened my arms to the sights before me and smiled at Ana. Marius translated and I waited for Ana to enjoy my admiration of her city. Instead, she folded her arms and avoided looking at me, jutting her chin at Marius instead. A tingle of unease settled over me, reminiscent of childhood betrayals – the friend who turned out *not* to be a friend.

"What did she think?" she asked. "That you were bringing her to Bangladesh?" She sniffed and turned her back on us while I searched for something to say.

Ana stands near the open gate, watching us load the car. Her hair is shorter and gray, her bifocals updated. She holds our daughter's hand until we have to shut the door. Long widowed now, she becomes the picture of loneliness in the frame of our car's rear window as we pull away.

I know a little about her coming days.

She'll pad through her apartment in cheap slippers and a housedress, her Sony flatscreen keeping her company in the background. She'll step onto her balcony off the kitchen, dead-heading the petunias a the slightest sign of wilt. A neighbor, Cezar, will call up to her and she'll wave, animate her face, and chat while he fills a container and waters his roses.

Traffic sounds funnel through the courtyard as another neighbor opens the gate common to the apartments in the small complex. A quite, mostly residential street when I first visited Romania has given way to rampant entrepreneurship. Facing Ana's building, a bright, busy

bazaar sits adjacent to a flooring company. Tucked behind most doorways along the wide crumbling sidewalk on either side of the street are crowded shops boasting food, clothing, toys, and house wares. Ana and her neighbors seem like holdouts now, their quiet way of life being squeezed from every side.

Her smile will linger from the conversation with Cezar while she pauses in the kitchen, her coffee cup and breakfast plate already clean, the midday meal hours away and no one to cook for. It'll be firmly Monday or Tuesday in Romania, but barely so in Topeka and not at all in Portland, where Dana lives. Several days will pass before she can let herself wonder if Dana or Marius might call over the weekend. Her smile will fade.

***

I discreetly watched Marius discreetly watch his father. Constantin's longtime nickname was Bebe and he was shrinking to fit it—hunched, frail and bald from too-late treatments while the nasal-pharyngeal tumor plodded along its erosive course. Marius had never had to look down to meet his father's eyes before.

We shared a beer, Marius smugly pointing out the higher-than-Colorado-Kool-Aid alcohol content, while Ana fussed over food on the stove. An old radio atop the fridge served a familiar but absurd accompaniment to our silence. Music from home.

I gave in to the lyrics of a song I claimed to hate but knew every wailing word of. Exaggerating a drawl, I sang along, lifting and prolonging the end. Despite my aversion to

country music, it felt kind of wonderful to slough off the layer of formality I was wearing in Romania, to act American.

Marius let a short smile touch his face before returning to the map spread out on the table before him. Ana didn't turn, possibly because she was deaf in her right ear, but Constantin raised serious eyes to Marius. "What did she say?" He asked.

I felt embarrassed and acutely foreign, like a specimen. But I didn't stop to think—not then at least—that I was here for two weeks. Two weeks only. Marius, however, would be on my turf forever.

***

I sat in the dining room, which also served as the TV room, on a couch-bed-thingy for which I had no grown-up vocabulary. I cross-stitched a Santa Claus that would liven the walls in our duplex from drab to seasonally drab in a few months. I felt a little silly carrying it across the Atlantic, but was glad for something to do after growing bored with watching Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks dubbed in German above Romanian subtitles.

Marius wandered the flat inspecting the handiwork of his youth and Ana pulled leftovers from the fridge for our supper. Constantin sat beside me. I stuck the needle in my mouth for safekeeping while I used two hands to change threads. Constantin watched with sudden concern and mimed the action of pulling the needle from his mouth. I did so, but repeated the procedure at the next thread change. He repeated the miming and shook his head. He called to Marius to report my behavior and Marius called to me in English from the other room.

"He says he's heard of gypsies swallowing needles and dying."

"Tell him I'll be careful," I called back.

Marius translated and Constantin appraised me, sighed, and left me to my peril. There was something deified about his reaction—an expression suggesting *I've done all I can for her and she still insists on free will.* Loosening my grip on the cross stitch hoop, I replaced thoughts of Constantin with thoughts of God. Not too many years before, when I still prayed and conjured a listener, I had asked for a future married name like Jones or Smith. My maiden name was Gillilan, but often mis-pronounced Gilliam, Gilligan, Gillun. My deficit of real wants prompted a semi-serious teenager request: a one-syllable idiot-proof name I didn't have to spell for people. Now I lay me down to sleep, please let me meet a good man named Smith.

After Marius and I announced our marriage plans, my father proposed that I exercise modern tradition and either keep my maiden name or hyphenate. Gillilan-Pacioianu. I called him crazy.

Santa on my lap, needle in my mouth, I listened to Marius and Ana's faint conversation in the kitchen. An unfamiliar breeze disturbed the kitchen curtains and mingled the scents of mothballs, fresh-cut roses, and roasted pork. A single light bulb failed to penetrate the darkening room and there I sat, almost a Pacioianu.

***

There's a Romanian saying that roughly translates to: *If my goat dies, I want my neighbor's goat to die, too*. Or more succinctly, *Death to the neighbor's goat.* Marius shared this with me before our trip. He'd emphasized the importance of wanting the goat to die. You

don't want a *new* goat or want to *steal* the neighbor's goat. *You. Want. It. To. Die.* Just like yours did. Matching misery so your neighbor can share your rotten luck. Fair's fair.

Our glasses changed shape, the contents changed colors. Skinny cylinders for amber liquor, round goblets for deep red wine, pear-shaped snifters for caramel brandy. Mariana, Mihai, and their daughter, Ioana, met us for an extravagant dinner at a half-empty restaurant. Marius had delivered more than 200 babies under Mariana's tutelage during one of his training rotations during which he'd briefly considered obstetrics before deciding that he needed more variation in parts and outcomes.

The basement establishment managed to convey "cozy" and "dungeon" simultaneously with dark wood tables, white tablecloths, thick stone walls, and dim lighting. After pleasantries, I removed Dana's slightly smudged suit jacket and hung it gingerly over the back of my chair, letting my eyes adjust to the low light and my lungs to the smoky haze. While Marius caught up with Mariana and Mihai in Romanian, I attempted polite conversation with their daughter, Ioana, who was 21 but seemed much younger. She skipped past small talk to confide in hesitant English about her first failed love. I got the feeling that the relationship occurred mostly in her imagination where it took on epic proportions culminating in tragic nothing. I wondered if the guy had even a hint of the depth of her feelings for him.

Ioana glowed with conspiratorial enthusiasm, confiding freely about her secret love in a language her parents couldn't follow. Despite less than three years difference in our ages, there was a gulf between us. Marius had told me that in his part of the world, independence from parents—financially and otherwise—came later.

Mariana looked at me, and I realized she'd asked me something. I sat up straighter at the inclusion and turned to Marius for translation. Marius cleared his throat in what I'd come to recognize as a stall tactic; he didn't want to translate. I'd surely misread, though, because Mariana had warm, crinkly eyes and heart-shaped lips like a children's book illustration of a loving aunt whose ire you could never invite or possibly deserve.

Marius finally spoke. "Uh, she asked, 'Don't you think Americans are infantile?'"

The lovely illustration grew horns and pointy teeth. I cocked my head and swished the whatever-colored alcohol in my whatever-shaped glass.

"I…" My upbringing stepped forward to put a hand to my mouth and I flushed pink instead. My people didn't confront or show anger in public. We were the kind of people who apologized for sending back a piece of undercooked chicken bleeding on the plate, if we decided to send it back at all. Most likely we'd just attempt to eat around the edges. I pondered the possibility that these rules might not apply on foreign soil, but I didn't know how to flout them.

Mariana wasn't going to be on the receiving end of my reaction anyway. She'd given me a beautiful blue Romanian coffee set earlier and told me I had a nice smile. But Marius was going home with me, so I bore into him instead with what must have been a hideous attempt at not reacting, my lips stretched against drink and hurt.

"What does she mean?" I asked, planting fake pleasantry on my face, in my voice.

"Oh, well, you know. Disneyland and things like that. Kitsch. Naiveté." he said. For someone supposed to be on my side, he'd sure come up with a couple of good words to underline Mariana's point.

"Disneyland," Mariana repeated and rolled her eyes.

I took a drink and looked at Marius a second longer than was probably comfortable for him. "Yeah. I guess we're silly," I said.

Everyone smiled some kind of smile. Marius spoke in Romanian, his eyes flicking apologies at me, and Mariana nodded. An important facet of the American psyche had been revealed apparently. She showed no hint of awareness that she'd been insulting.

Ioana launched into another story. "My mother has a baby last year. I have a brother," she said. "He comes early, but he is perfect, only too soon. We hold him when he died. His hands and feet are *so* little, *so* perfect."

My anger dissolved into shame. "I'm so sorry." I turned and repeated my condolences to Mariana. Ioana clued her parents into what she'd told me and Mariana waved away the unpleasant subject like a bad smell. After a few awkward starts, levity returned. Subjects changed with the glasses. Marius translated more. I chatted with Ioana the rest of the night. Though if anyone dared to lift the lid, they'd have seen I was on low simmer. Marius noticed but forgot.

It was nearly one a.m. when we left. I'd never seen Marius drunk before—he's a two-drink maximum kind of guy—but he sang badly on the walk home, one arm hooking my neck and pulling me closer. We finally parted ways with Mariana, Mihai and Ioana, exchanging warm sentiments and kisses.

After we were alone, I wanted to spoil Marius' buzz. I'd been at the kids' table all night, invited into grown-up conversation only long enough to be insulted. I was walking back into my mother-in-law's domain to be insulted some more. And here was Marius—happy, warbling. Happy. But I'd wait until the next day to tell him that I'd never heard anything more infantile

than the neighbor's goat. I'd announce this with my arms folded while sitting criss-cross-applesauce on the couch-bed-thingy in his parent's dining room.

Ana's glasses slipped down her damp nose as she dipped into a bowl of plums, pitting each one. That done, she wet her fingers and palms under a thin stream from the tap, scooped a handful of dough made from mashed potatoes, and tucked in a plum, shaping the dough into a ball around it. "*Asa,"* she said, scooting her glasses back in place with her wrist. *Like so*.

It was one of the few Romanian dishes I would not like, something I already had an inkling of as I watched her make it. Fruit and mashed potatoes. Nope.

But I would eat it.

My first Romanian meal was in Cleveland, where Marius lived for four years. Where he had Romanian friends (and an ex-wife and daughter but that's quite another story). Where I learned that the response to Romanian hospitality is eating. And eating. And more eating. Refusing would be like shunning the cheese made from the milk of your neighbor's healthy goat. Even if your own goat is dead, it's just not done. Eat the cheese, make a fuss over its quality, kill the neighbor's goat another day.

***

Oranges had been a one-time luxury each winter in Romania. Half a day in line rewarded Marius, his sister, and their parents with ten oranges to share. Because of their rarity, they'd peeled carefully and savored every bite.

In Phoenix, crushed and rotting oranges littered the streets. They were a nuisance to the residents who rolled over them on the way to buy oranges at the grocery store. Marius was unaware of this when he set out for basics during his first week in the United States. Although he lived a little far from the store, he was unaccustomed to seventy-two-degree February days and walking sounded irresistible. At first, the oranges seemed too good to be true. They pulled heavy against the branches and hit the ground with a muted thud right in front of him. He wanted to gather as many as he could scoop into his shirt and carry them home. He decided he would make several trips; this was a windfall. But that's precisely what stopped him. The scene before him changed. He noticed the varying degree of rot in the oranges that had fallen – and stayed – beneath the trees, and the slush of battered rinds and pulp in the street. Cars flattened them without slowing and no one else was taking advantage of the windfall. Later, he asked a fellow Romanian why.

"Nobody eats those oranges – they're sour," said the Romanian, who'd lived in the States for several years. Marius had only just arrived, so despite his incredulity, he listened to the man.

Regardless of the temptation, Marius knew that picking up the oranges would set him apart, like his hand-knit sweaters and worn pants. Unlike in Romania, where most trees – even those along the streets – were meant to serve a purpose beyond shade and ornament, the unclaimed trees here were resented for what they produced. Ornament alone was valued. Marius left the oranges were they lay.

The market in Timisoara was a wonder of real food. Fresh unpasteurized milk, meat free of shrink wrap, fruit still clinging to dirt and vine remnants and leaves. Ripeness, in every sense of the word, thickened the air. There was no stocking up—the market was a near-daily excursion

and Marius' mother usually got there and back before we woke up. It was a supplemental food source, though. Each flat owner in the complex had a plot of soil in the courtyard, narrow and long, clearly staked. Fruit trees, tomato vines, beans, and peppers. I stumbled over the word for tomato on a tour of the garden and Ana asked Marius if I'd never seen one before. She seemed disappointed when he laughed—she so badly wanted to teach me new things. But she was really teaching me old things.

In the mornings, she skimmed cream off the top of the milk that she had boiled herself. The cream went into a cake, the thick milk into a small but deep pot—an *ibric*—on the small gas stove. She added cocoa and raw sugar before pouring each of us a mug. I decided that I needed little else besides this hot chocolate.

Ana's kitchen was small and largely un-automated. Cream and egg whites were whipped by her hand-powered spoon. Living was exercise, food was seasonal, meals measured the day.

In Timisoara, Marius and I walked to the Piata Operei to see its carpet of flowers in bloom. Along the way, without breaking stride or conversation, Marius' hand disappeared into the low branches of one of the plum trees lining the street. He bit from the small, purple fruit.

"Are they ripe?" I asked, wrinkling my nose. "You're not even going to wash it?"

He smiled and shook his head, tugging lightly on my ponytail.

***

Distance in Romania was calculated in minutes walked. "Oh, it's a twenty minutes' walk," was the most frequent estimate, which I learned was as accurate as a contractor saying "about two weeks." If Marius said five minutes, I braved nicer, less comfortable shoes. If he said thirty minutes, I substituted comfort for fashion. The "ten minutes" to Marius' uncle's house left me uncertain.

Anymore, Constantin was spared such obligations as a visit to his brother. Outside of train travel to and from his hospitalizations for radiation treatment, he rested, watched *fotbal,* and joined us (in the physical sense at least) for meals, staring past us at the wall. I was surprised, though, when Ana left us outside of the uncle's apartment, shrugging vaguely when Marius questioned why she didn't come inside. Maybe one incapacitated brother was all she could face at a time, or maybe she didn't care for her sister-in-law.

The apartment was much smaller than Ana and Constantin's and I envisioned Marius' childhood accommodations. Contantin's brother, Petre, was positioned in one dim corner of the room, off to the side like an inherited statue of questionable taste. His right side was useless after a stroke suffered several years before. I wondered if Petre's hearing was also diminished or if the yell-speak that everyone used with him was an involuntary reaction to his chronic condition.

I had yet to experience a brightly lit space in Romania, and the apartment was no exception. The effect, in this case, was a darkened, patchy memory: Marius bending to Petre in greeting, Petre gripping him with his good arm, his face slack on one side and labile on the other—bewildered then crumpled in sobs then blank then back to bewildered. Flashes of Petre crying loudly at intervals throughout the visit. An offering of pretzel sticks and room temperature Fanta. Petre's wife, his third, exuding the competence and weariness of a long-time

caregiver, her voice the pure gravel of a veteran smoker. Measuring glances in my direction. A re-measuring when I attempted the language. A feeling of being adrift and lost.

On the walk back, I was once again struck by the quality of darkness in Romania, though I appreciated that it took a clear position outside, unlike the half-lit ambiguity of the indoors. Marius' relief at being outside mirrored my own. He hadn't seen his uncle since well before the stroke. Petre had been the good communist of the family, a trait repellant to Marius who spent the pre-revolution years pretending just enough loyalty to go unnoticed. But Petre had *believed* in the Party.

I thought of Constantin curled up in bed watching *fotbal,* waiting for a tumor that no one acknowledged to kill him while Petre sat in his corner crying bewilderment while Marius lived a milk-and-honey distance away.

Several days later, we would take a train to the mountains on the opposite side of the country. On the way back we'd stop for the night in Cluj where Marius' father received in-patient radiation treatments. I would get sick from a cab driver's cigarette exhaust on the way to the hospital. The hospital would be dilapidated and depressing and I'd want to scoop Constantin up, out of there. He wouldn't complain, just eat his second bowl of cabbage soup without meat for the day and watch blankly, a small lump of frailty, as we'd leave. Our hotel room would offer dingy twin beds with matching blood-red coverlets and no towels in the bathrooms. Marius would curse Romania. I would pick a fight and flop down on my bed raising a cloud of mustiness. I'd tell Marius this was all too much. Sobbing, I would slip my engagement ring off my finger, place it on the red bedspread and slide it toward Marius. He'd refuse to pick it up for a while and pat my leg after his hug was rejected. He'd listen to me cry myself to sleep. The

next morning, he'd don a patient smile, sit at the foot of my bed, and slide the ring back across the bedspread. I'd blink puffy eyes, laugh sheepishly, and put it back on my finger.

***

The exhaust from the truck in front of us was edible. We followed it for an hour, one-third of our trip to the resort town of Herculane. Ovidiu took a roundabout at top speed, conversing in same-speed Romanian. He broke conversation to shoot a Fuck-your-mother at the truck driver who settled in front of us, back to two lanes. I silently willed him to look at the road more, to keep his hands on the wheel. Ovidiu gestured; I gripped the seat. He turned to Marius; I worked an unresponsive break with my foot. Ovidiu offered me chocolate and bottled water and I took it, planning to at least die sated.

In dark days, Ovidiu was a loyal friend. Marius' father had quietly advised Marius to cope by any means, but to stay married. Marius' mother had disowned him. His sister and other friends hadn't understood the drastic decision to divorce, but Ovidiu had supported him fiercely. As a witness to Marius' misery during the demise of his first marriage, I worried about Ovidiu's approval, but he radiated warmth. He seemed equally eager for my approval. I didn't understand much of what he said—if Marius was like an instructional tape for learning Romanian, Ovidiu was all bad-boy slang.

Herculane is a beautiful spa town in a valley of misty mountains. The air was heavy with drizzle, but finally unspoiled after the long drive behind the wheezing truck. Marius was struck by the lack of people and Ovidiu explained that times were hard, tourism suffered. We walked

all afternoon and met no one. We ate at an empty restaurant where I confused Ovidiu with comments about being full despite the small portions and Marius launched into a description of American consumption. It sounded especially absurd there surrounded by no consumption.

I slept on the drive home, my head aching from the effort to comprehend Ovidiu's Romanian. When we reached the apartment the contrast of place made the day feel like a vision of us wandering through post-apocalyptic desertedness. The letdown ended, though, when Ovidiu trailed us into Ana's territory. He was tension and irreverence decorated in a bright red track suit. Ana greeted him with excruciating politeness, revealing the extent to which she disliked him. I realized that Ovidiu's very presence was a reminder that he mothered when she didn't and I suddenly loved him for it. Ovidiu, relaxed and smiling, accepted Ana's tight invitation to stay for supper as if she'd offered the fatted calf. Ovidiu put his arm around me, much like I'd imagined blond-future-husband's father would do, and I felt the communication barrier between us dissolve into exactly the same language.

***

Ana's birthday fell during our visit. Marius bought her a new clock and it saddened me to think of her watching it after we left while Constantin gradually slipped away. We stopped at a flower stand manned by a scowling woman of indeterminate age. She looked hard, like many of the shopkeepers I'd seen there. I'd been struck by their animosity; they seemed to resent our business, but they especially resented browsing without buying.

For some un-remembered reason, we decided against the flowers. Overhearing our conversation in English, the woman spit some words at our backs as we walked away. Marius smiled without turning.

"What did she say?"

"Something like, 'Goddamned foreigners.'"

"Yet you're smiling," I said.

"Well, yeah. These are my people."

He'd said this before. We'd been in Mexico, a few months prior to Romania. We'd boarded a bus. I found a seat while Marius paid the driver. He walked slowly down the aisle, lips moving while he counted his change then abruptly turned back to the driver, touching a finger to the money. The driver muttered in Spanish but didn't look up as he dropped a couple of more coins into Marius' palm.

Marius steps were buoyant on his way back to our seat. "He cheated me," Marius explained, smiling and curling his fingers into a fist of triumph around the money. "These are my people!"

"You couldn't let the poor guy have a few extra pesos?" I asked.

"That's not the point," said Marius. "We understand each other."

I caught the driver's glare in the rearview. "He looks like he's cursing you."

"Yeah, but he's cursing something he *understands*."

Steps from the flower stand, I told Marius I didn't understand why getting cheated or cursed by one of his "people" brought him so much joy.

"Cheating is survival here," he said. "I never thought I would miss it, but sometimes I do."

And participation was expected—something Marius pointed out in the markets, in Romania and in Mexico, when I failed to haggle for a better deal. I'd learned that it was like a red, white and blue stamp on my forehead, this habit of paying full price. This sense of trust and assumed honesty.

Cheating is survival.

I wanted to react automatically—to spout some homespun ideology about rightness and fairness—but it didn't apply there, in Marius' world. The words fell away and I stood there, incorporating, balking, giving way. I wouldn't know for a while how to define this new feeling of sprouting of roots that anchored me somewhere besides small-town, Midwest America.

I thought of the disembodied voice I heard upon walking into any store at home, saying "Welcome to _____, can I help you find something?" while I answered to the air, searching for the source. I thought of the waiter stopping by our table ten times, always when we were mid-chew, for approval on the food. Open faces. Smiling faces. My people. For the first time, I was on the outside looking in.

***

Back in the car with Ovidiu for another harrowing trip, this time to visit his mother in a nearby village, he let out a stream of obscenities aimed at another driver. I knew they were obscenities because of the biting tone, the hand gestures, and, true to cliché, those were the words I'd learned first. Always know what you *shouldn't* say. Some of these were new, though, and I asked Marius to translate. He translated my request instead.

Ovidiu laughed and said, “Don’t tell her. She won’t like me anymore.”

“Actually,” Marius said, “I have no idea how to capture what he said in English. Americans aren’t very colorful when they curse. You just use the same words in the same combinations. I feel no satisfaction when I curse in English.”

I’d never heard him attempt to curse in English. And I got plenty of satisfaction when I cursed. I reminded him of something. “Well at least we have the word ‘fun.’ That’s something.”

Several days earlier, Ana had asked how we’d liked our dinner with Mariana and Mihai. Ever the diplomat, I’d said it was fun. Marius couldn’t find a Romanian equivalent, finally choosing *distractie* to convey that we’d been entertained. Initially, I’d laughed, but the more I thought about it, it wasn’t funny at all. No word for fun. I decided I could give up colorful cursing but please, let me have fun.

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I emerged from a Dramamine-induced stupor to countryside so green it shocked the film from my eyes. The train was dingy and stale from smoke, scented by bodies in close proximity. As much as I’d wanted to assume an adventurous spirit in the face of the rocking, the smoking, the stubborn compartment window, the twelve hour trip—Dramamine had seemed like the smarter option. But the view was worth waking up for.

The land had risen around us, boasting velvet hills dotted with golden, hut-like mounds of hay. My mind conjured fantasies of hobbits, the Shire, Middle-earth. Industrial, cylindrical

bales would have seemed alien and cold here, like a stainless steel countertop in Laura Ingalls' log cabin.

We'd left the western edge of Romania for the mountains of the northeast. A Cleveland friend, Andrei, had arranged for us to visit his parents who lived in Campulung Moldovenesc, a scenic town flanking the Carpathians. They would accommodate us while we toured the famous monasteries, many now UNESCO World Heritage sites, where Marius would tell me that the 15th century painted frescoes on one of the monasteries displayed a color blue not yet duplicated, its composition unknown.

My bladder nagged for relief after the drugged sleep. Marius pointed me in the direction of the toilet and went back to gazing out the window. Though, halfway down the aisle, he was suddenly behind me. "I thought I better go with you," he said.

"I'm fine."

"Well, anyway." He followed, alternating brief handholds for balance against the sway of the train. I leaned back against him and he kissed my ear, asking if I really felt okay.

"Yep. Fine." And I meant it. The scenery was like a reset button replacing my fogginess with anticipation for something different. But not the kind of different that greeted me at the bathroom. After checking the grimy W.C. sign above a stubborn sliding door, I entered a small brown room. Well, not all brown. There were hints of yellow.

Marius didn't cross the threshold. "How bad do you need to go?" he asked.

"Bad," I said faintly.

"I think I'll wait," he said. He shot me a sympathetic look and left me to it.

I couldn't wait another hour or more so I decided to employ the hover method. But hovering while swaying would be tricky and might explain how some of the gory scene before

me came to be. Along with someone's violent intestinal illness? Whatever happened here didn't seem to be fresh and facing this room had probably inspired many a passenger to hold it. I drew closer to see that the brown stuff actually seemed lacquered onto the toilet seat, wall, and one side of the sink like a vengeful railroad employee decided to decoupage on his lunch break, but with shit and urine instead of varnish. It shined just so.

Not for the first time in my life, I was jealous of the ease with which men can pee standing at a safe distance. In my attempt to hit the general area of the toilet bowl, I looked down and immediately hopped back up, cutting short a scream. Something was moving in the bowl. Wait, there was no bowl. Just the tracks flying beneath me.

The nun didn't look at us as she monotoned a brief history of the monastery. She looked at the ground, beyond us, over her shoulder, swishing her black veil strapped to her black pillbox hat. Waves of irritation rolled off this holy woman when Marius tried to force a pause in her spiel so he could translate.

A yawn escaped. That got her attention. The nun whipped her eyes to mine and went silent, pulling herself up straight. Before she walked away, in the alertness that followed my faux pas, I noticed her pock-marked, bare-of-make-up skin and her unruly dark eyebrows. She was young. Marius waited until she'd gone to translate her trail of mutterings at the end. "She said she won't bore you any longer."

"But I wasn't bored; I didn't sleep last night. How am I the rude one here? She wouldn't even look at us!"

Marius put his arm around me as if to comfort a child. Pat, pat, pat on my arm. "Don't worry about it—she was a bitchy nun."

Despite his attempt at lightness, he wasn't so blasé. The shopkeepers, the empty restaurants, the nun—they represented a larger issue on which he regularly flipped. Anger at what he saw as passive-aggressive defeatism, guilt over joining a wave of emigrants who left a broken country behind, disgust when his mother suggested that life was better under Communism. Marius liked to say, Everybody had a job; everybody got paid the same for doing nothing. What now?

Marius guided me to the entrance – dark, heavy wooden doors through a fortress of stone safeguarding the church. As the story goes, Stefan the Great built many of the monasteries in religious fervor following victories against Ottoman and Tartar invasions in the 15th century. They were breathtaking structures that ripped away the passage of time from beneath my feet. Oblong and smooth-walled and capped by roofs shaped like witches' hats. We toured six monasteries over our stay. My favorites had vivid Byzantine frescoes which survived centuries to tell old tales through robed, haloed figures.

They've converged in memory. Which housed Stefan the Great's tomb? Which boasted impossibly red roses against blinding white walls? Which introduced the pissed off nun? The hush of dim interiors, the flicker of candles drawing long shadows against the walls. Gold plated icons, old and large. Gold everywhere, actually – icons, altars, chandeliers.

Marius told me to keep my mouth shut.

"What?!"

He shushed me and pointed to a sign. We were waiting at the rear of a modest line to buy an icon—a much smaller, newer, less adorned version than what we'd just ogled inside the church. The sign announced a higher price for foreigners.

"Seriously?" I asked, a bit louder than needed. His unfortunate choice of words inspired retaliation.

Marius sighed. "I didn't mean it badly."

"Oh. *Keep your mouth shut*. There's a *not* bad way to mean that?"

He put a finger to his lips and pled with his eyes. We were next in line. I wondered how big the markup could be and wanted to argue that he wasn't a foreigner and that I shouldn't count in the transaction. But the former might not have been true anymore, and what did it have to do with profit anyway?

I kept my mouth shut.

The icon was a painted Christ ringed in muted gold. Gilded ceremony on a block of wood. I ran my fingers over it and thought of where it would reside at home in our cardboard duplex.

Our hosts were hell bent on feeding us to death. When mealtimes arrived, I longed to be back at Ana's where Marius fought my battles with Ana, telling her to leave me alone after two helpings. But at Andrei's parents' mountain home, Marius suffered along with me, paralyzed into submission by the required politeness. I'd braved it with confidence at first, over-calculating the effect of the mountain air on my appetite. But no bolstered appetite could handle the amount of food thrown our way. Hence the bloated, sleepless first night. Hence the yawn that would piss off the nun at the monastery the next day.

Andrei's mother put Ana to shame in the guilt department. Refusing another shot of Tuica (plum liquor, but liquid fire to me) to "cleanse the palate" or that third cut of meat or second piece of cake might just kill her dead.

Gastric trauma aside, the visit was magical. The house was a free-standing delight with vines crawling up beige concrete walls resting upon a jigsaw stone foundation. The partial upper level was sided in dark stained wood adding a mountain resort flair. It sat on a slight rise, like a promise. Roses popped against a pristine green yard. The crisp air revived me.

The tour began in the kitchen where we were greeted by the oven's hot cinnamon breath. And lovelier still, I was led to a bathroom that stood in sharp contrast to the train's room of horrors. I peeled off my travel clothes and languished in the tub, listening to the chatter in the kitchen. I was amazed by how familiar it sounded, by the whirring in my brain—a newly functioning compartment for dissecting spoken Romanian. The first few days of the trip, I'd told Marius that my head and tongue hurt by nightfall. He'd commiserated, remembering his beginnings in the U.S. "But I dream in English now," he'd said.

Marius took over the bathroom and I moved to the kitchen, standing uncertainly in the doorway while trying to decide how to announce myself to the hosts I barely knew. Both had their backs to me—Andrei's father at the table with a newspaper and his mother at the counter going through our travel provisions. She unwrapped our leftover sandwiches, sniffed, and wrinkled her nose before tossing them in the garbage. She acted a little guilty when she saw me, as if I'd caught her rendering commentary on the quality of Ana's food. I was ushered to a chair. We stumbled through half-understood exchanges until Marius returned, a relief to us all.

"Did you notice that only the kitchen and bathroom are heated?" Marius asked me, with a raised eyebrow. He pointed to a large butane stove against the kitchen wall.

"But where do we sleep?" I smiled through my words in front of our hosts. I already knew it dropped into the 30's in the mountains at night.

Marius laughed and told me not to worry. I thought he'd been joking, but he pointed to a massive comforter on the couch in the next room. "We'll sleep under that." A *plapuma*. It was a foot and a half thick and filled with goose down.

"I watched my grandma pluck many, many geese to fill one of those things," Marius said. "A lot of naked birds."

I was skeptical until about midnight. At forty-something degrees in our room, I was sweating under the *plapuma*. I stripped down to my t-shirt, kicked a leg out and felt the weight of too much food in my belly. If I'd slept at all that night, my dreams would certainly have been in English.

Years later, Marius would tell me that I had it all wrong. We weren't in line for the icon when he told me to keep my mouth shut. There was no markup at the monastery. We'd been in line at the hotel in Cluj instead. The one where I'd given back the ring and told him it was all too much. I could picture us clear as day in line at the monastery arguing over his choice of words. I didn't give up easily, but something eventually pinged in memory and I wondered if I'd gotten it all wrong. Memories, like those dreams just out of reach the next morning, can divide and situate themselves wherever they like.

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The cardboard duplex felt garishly bright in contrast to Romania's dim interiors. Our slick faux-cherry TV cabinet radiated cheapness compared to the rich, carved furniture in Ana

and Constantin's flat. Marius vacillated between giddy and subdued since our return, both more and less anchored in his new country.

While he slid pictures into plastic-sleeved albums and organized the negatives for safe-keeping, I dumped a pile of clean clothes on the bed and began folding. The conversation meandered benignly for a while. We talked kids, religion, where to settle, how often to bring his mother over. Constantin hovered just beyond our discussion; we knew he'd never see America. Marius let go bit by bit of the imagined scenarios, like the one of dropping his father off at Lowe's or Home Depot for the day where he would surely be entranced for hours by the sheer size and abundance of building materials. Marius imagined leaving his father there for an entire work day, returning to find Constantin only halfway through the aisles.

I was half-listening to Marius when he moved the subject back to children. "We could send the kids to my mom for a month or two in the summers," he said.

I stopped folding clothes. "What? You would send our *children* to Romania for the whole summer? *With your mother?*"

"Why not? My mother would love it."

I unleashed a rant. Something like, *never in a million years would I dump my kids halfway around the world where they might fry in an apartment without air-conditioning—not even a fan—because an evil draft might infect their nether regions*. I folded clothes with fury and Marius fell silent watching me.

After a few moments, he said, "Why isn't this normal? Why wouldn't we send our kids to Romania for the summer?"

I didn't have a clue how to approach such a big gap in our ideas on childrearing, so I folded faster instead. It must have been a sight. Marius watched me wipe away an angry tear.

"You're *crying*? We don't even have kids yet." He paused, considering something. "Nether region?"

"A cold in my woman parts, Marius. Your mother told me I would get a *cold* in my *woman parts* because I went barefoot with damp hair. It was eighty-goddamn-degrees out." His mother had told me lots of things, so why that moment mattered most right then, I couldn't explain. Romania was hot during our late summer visit. Leaving the windows open in our bedroom at night invited a persistent mosquito to hover at our ears rather than any relief from the heat. It was a pleasure to take a shower before bed and pad through the apartment, damp hair resting against my neck and cool marble floors beneath my bare feet. But Marius' mother had surveyed me with horror. She patted her abdomen and asked Marius to translate embarrassing predictions while his father had followed me around with a hair dryer, nodding hopefully. At the time, it was comedy; I'd given in, plugging in the hair dryer only to find that I could have blown a stronger, hotter current with my own breath.

The clothes were in a mangled heap, looking less folded than when I'd started. I searched for a better excuse for the anger and tears. I dropped my arms and said, "How could you want to send our kids to her – she beat the hell out of you!"

"Ah. You Americans and your *abuse*," he said. "Yes, she was tougher than most mothers even in Romania, but nobody there would have considered me *abused.* They would have said she was a little hard on me." Marius blew out a breath. "Anyway, she'd never put a hand on her grandchildren. Romanian mothers and Romanian grandmothers are not even remotely the same species."

Kids came along so much later than we expected; we'd fought over sending our children to Romania eight years prematurely. Eventually, we adopted from China. As I watched our daughter Elena lap up every bit of Ana's attention during her visits to us, how she led Ana by the hand from place to place and spoke Romanian with increasing proficiency, I warmed to the idea of a summer visit. I asked Marius if we should talk to his mother about Elena staying for a few weeks without us the next summer.

He looked at me like I was out of my mind. "Without us? What do you mean?" His mother didn't have air conditioning. Not even a fan. Elena would suffocate. She would swell up from mosquito bites. How would she fall asleep at night? What would she eat? What if she got separated from his mother on the tram? Or on the street? Or climbed on a chair on the balcony? Had I forgotten the story about his mother threatening to sell him to the gypsies as a child if he didn't study? Had I forgotten the story of her forcing him to kneel on broken nutshells when he was five? Had I forgotten the story of her hitting him until she was breathless? Had I forgotten all of the stories?

But he was the one who'd forgotten the fight years before, and in the meantime, I'd witnessed the Mother-in-law species evolve into the Grandmother species. In Ana's care, Elena's fledgling woman parts were safe, which didn't seem so crazy after all.

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"When I was in high school, somebody with good connections brought the syrup to a party. I'd heard of it, but didn't know you were supposed to add carbonation. The siphon bottle was sitting right there, but I didn't know. I poured a glass of the syrup – it was so thick and sweet – and drank it straight, wondering why everyone thought it was so wonderful."

In 1989, the Romanian dictator, Ceausescu, learned that his people didn't love him after all. First just students, then many thousands more rose up against him. They took to the streets and shouted and marched. After attempting a failed escape, Ceausescu was executed with his wife on Christmas day. The important thing is the people chose their own fate.

Or,

the CIA and KGB were co-conspirators in orchestrating a coup.

I wondered if Marius believed in what he didn't see. If "the plural of anecdote is data," it still depends on who you ask.

We went to Romania in 1997, a month before our wedding. Marius was excited to show me the hospital where he'd trained. He told me stories of his favorite colleagues and introduced me enthusiastically.

The colleagues smiled but not fully. They didn't embrace him. Their eyes never settled on me.

"I'm so disappointed," he said later.

Maybe when you leave your country it looks away from you when you return.

We drove up the mountain in search of water. Marius filled a bottle from a cold cascade beside the road. He tasted it, then poured it out and drove higher.

The red Dacia lurched. "I've forgotten how to drive one of these things," Marius said and wrenched the stick into a lower gear. The engine sounded like my brother-in-law's scooter back home.

We rounded a corner and Marius threw on the brakes for sheep meandering home. "Futu-ti mama ta!" Fuck your mother, he told them. We watched the sheep for a while, their dirty coats twitching against flies, their hooves caked in mud and shit. Marius, shrugging off nostalgic notions of water fresh off the mountain, threw the plastic water bottle into the backseat.

"We'll find a well at the monastery," he said.

“They haven’t duplicated the blue,” Marius said.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s called ‘Voronet Blue’ because the composition of the paint remains unknown. It’s only here.”

“Since the whatever hundreds?” I asked.

“Yes. Since the 1400s.”

I thought of conquerors with paintbrushes mixing a new blue, turning victory into godliness, as conquerors are prone to do.

Despite his weakness, Constantin walked to the market each day for one of the small, sweet watermelons that I'd made a fuss over. He woke up early so we wouldn't stop him from going or try to carry it for him. The naso-pharyngeal tumor had been discovered too late. Nobody said the word cancer to him even though he was shrunken, wasted, thick-tongued from the radiation. If he knew, he might decide to die sooner.

One afternoon in 1983, a lone car waited for Marius outside of the hospital, the right tires perched on the curb. This was the third time. Marius stiffened and left his colleagues, sliding into the passenger seat while the dark-haired driver dropped his cigarette out of the window. He drove off without speaking. The usual questions began a few minutes later and the *securitate* agent's irritation became apparent more quickly this time. Marius' answers were insufficient.

"What did he want from you?"

Marius said his test scores had gained him recognition with the officials. They'd recruited him for party membership and then targeted him as a likely informant.

"They questioned me about my colleagues, one by one. They expected me to be smart, but I played so dumb. I said things like, 'He's a hard worker' or "She's really dedicated, Comrade.'"

"Were you scared?"

"Terrified," Marius said. "But mad."

Marius' mother wheeled the washer into the bathroom and hooked a hose to the sink. She slid a box from behind the bidet and scooped powdered soap from it with a mug, sprinkling it slowly

into the rising water. Marius began adding our clothing, piece by piece. Ana plugged in the machine when it was full. While it sputtered to life, she retrieved a broom handle – sans broom – and began poking at our clothes until they started to agitate in a slow circle. She pulled the handle out and pointed at the clothes, which promptly stopped turning. She stabbed at them again until they resumed their slow circle, then handed me the broom handle.

"*Bine*?" she asked.

"*Bine*," I answered, sticking in the broom handle and stirring the laundry.

We spent most of our time eating, so food and condiments were the easiest to remember. Ana's garden was a vocabulary test. "*Salata, fasole galbena, fasole verde, radichi*…" I snapped my fingers and tapped my forehead. "What is it Marius? The word for tomato?" Marius' mother broke in, her tone incredulous. Marius laughed then seemed to admonish her. "*Mica, este serios?*" he asked her.

"What?" I asked.

"She said, 'Hasn't she ever seen a tomato before?'"

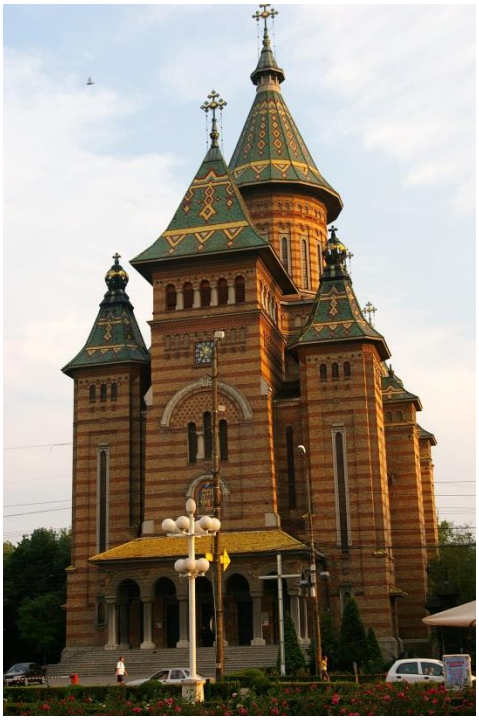
"To accepting my son with all of his problems," Ana toasts, raising her glass in my direction. Marius looks beyond her at the wall while he translates. Constantin seems not to have heard her, throwing back his shot glass of *tuica* unceremoniously.

The plum liquor burns all the way down, either because it's 100-proof or because I'm complicit in the sentiment by drinking it.

Marius turns me away from the McDonald's ("This wasn't here before.") towards an older building adorned with carved stone. He rests an arm on my shoulder, pointing up. I follow his finger to the gouges left by the army's guns.

"They began shooting at people who joined the uprising. Mostly students," Marius tells me.

Our daughter and her late grandfather share the same "name day" celebrating saints Elena and Constantin. She never knew him, but lights a candle in his name while Ana steadies her young hand. "*Asa,"* Ana says while Elena stares into the flame. *Like so.*



Everyone in the tram sat except one man up front and one woman in the back. The man held on to a support, looking straight ahead. The woman shook a broom at him and yelled from the back. Several passengers grumbled disapproval, seeming embarrassed.

"What's happening?" I asked Marius.

"She's telling her husband what she plans to do with the broomstick. It involves his ass."

I looked back at the woman who stopped her diatribe long enough to suck in a breath. She wore a head scarf and layers of multi-colored skirts. Her face was lined and grim, but Marius guessed she was in her 30s.

The man suddenly turned and spit a response as the tram slowed. The woman shouted back, but moved quickly toward the rear door, sliding out as it opened and glancing back over her shoulder to monitor her husband's pursuit.

Marius had translated the word *tigani* for me days ago when his mother used it to refer to kids begging on the street. Gypsies. I heard it muttered around me now as people rose to get off the tram.

In 1998. Ana and I walked on the street in our rural Missouri neighborhood. She'd asked me how many kids we planned to have.

"I think three kids are more than Marius can afford," she said. "Even here in the United States."

When she wanted me to understand, her speech changed from formal and flowery to slow and simple.

While I searched through my poor supply of words to express firmly, yet politely, *That's our business*, Ana stopped and touched her toe to the curb. A long stretch of grass led beyond it up to a neighbor's porch.

"Now there are *three* things America doesn't have," she said. "America has no smell, no dust, *and* no sidewalks."

At the end of each phone call, Ana gave Marius instructions for what to do in the event of her death. Now that she'd added her name to the stone, the instructions were more specific. *The important papers are in my wardrobe. Call the neighbor – she'll distribute my leftover meds to friends.* She asked if Marius was writing down the neighbor's number, but he wasn't. *Don't worry about the grave – someone will keep the flowers fresh and the candles lit.*

Cezar's garden borders Ana and Constantin's. He stops me on the stairs and exercises his English. He carries fresh cut roses stripped of their thorns in one hand. The other hand gestures against the Romanian reputation.

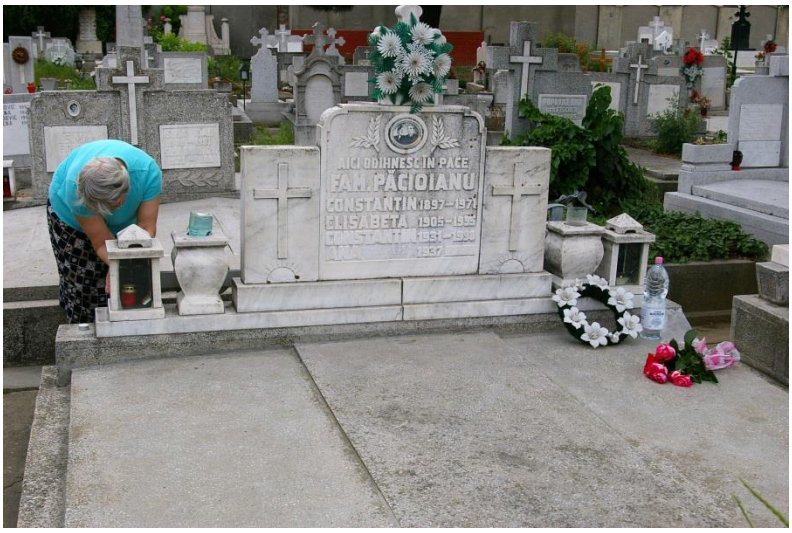
"Nobody wants us. You have a lucky passport. No, a lucky birth!" It's good the roses are de-thorned, he grips them so tight.

During our 2009 visit, Ana gave Elena 50 euros and told her to spend it how she liked.

In 1997, Marius' friend Ovidiu took us to a guy he knew. The guy took us behind a fence and quietly inspected our dollars for authenticity before counting off the much devalued Lei in exchange.

"Remember that?" Marius asked me, referring to the fence those years ago, to the guy behind it who held our dollars up to the sunlight. He swept a hand toward Ana's bedroom.

"Now my mother has rolls of euros in her underwear drawer."



We walked along the river Bega. "There was a café here somewhere," Marius said. "After school, me and my friends had a beer, maybe a pastry. Seems so long ago. *Was* so long ago."

We found a café, similar to the one Marius remembered. He ordered a spongy cake, layered with cream in different colors. As we waited to be served, he described the rich flavors, the delicate texture, the complex preparation.

He tried to fit the taste to the memory, but his face betrayed him.

Marius' father Constantin napped in the next room, his snores accompanying a soccer game on the TV. I tried and failed to pick up the thread of Marius and Ana's conversation floating in from the kitchen, their words drowned by intermittent running water, the opening and closing of an oven door, a metal spoon against a metal pan. I closed the book in my lap and thought of home.